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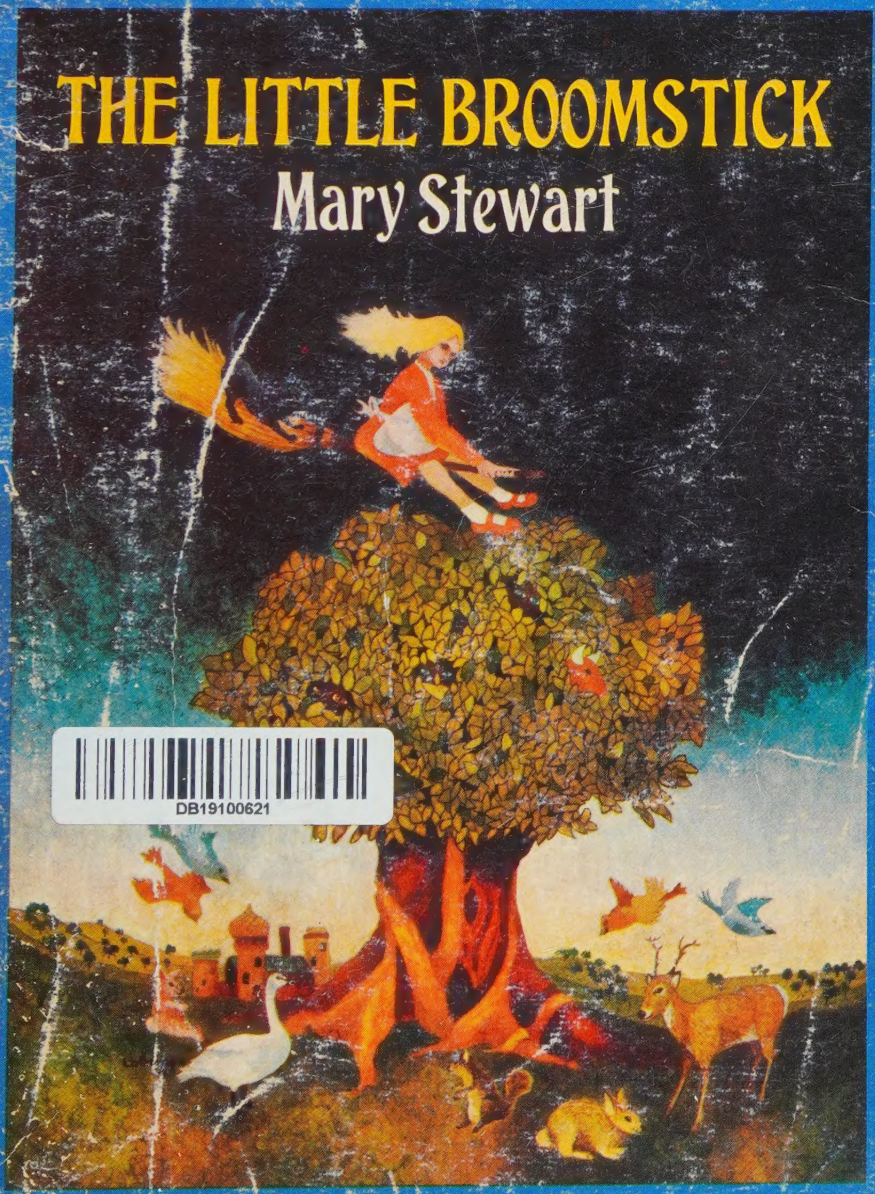

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The Little Broomstick

by Mary Stewart

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A YEARLING BOOK

Published by
DELL PUBLISHING CO., INC.
1 Dag Hammarskjold Plaza
New York, N.Y. 10017

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Published in Great Britain in 1971

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Inquiries should be addressed to
William Morrow and Company, Inc.
105 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10016.
Yearling ® TM 913705, Dell Publishing Co., Inc.
Reprinted by arrangement with
William Morrow and Company, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America
First Yearling printing—October 1973

To
Troy,
my resident familiar,
and
Johnny,
the cat who came in
from the cold.

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THE LITTLE BROOMSTICK

1

THE LITTLE BLACK CAT

Even her name was plain. Mary Smith. Nothing could have been more depressing, she thought; to be plain, to be ten, and to be alone, staring out of her bedroom window on a gray autumn day, and to be called Mary Smith.

She was the only plain one in the family. Jenny had lovely long hair that really was the color of gold, and everyone said Jeremy was handsome; they were older than Mary, cleverer, more attractive in every way. Moreover, they were twins, and had each other, while Mary, who was five years their junior, might as well (she thought dejectedly) have been an only child. Not that she grudged anything to them; it had always seemed to her natural that they should get things that she could not have. As now. . . .

When the news had come that Daddy would have to go to the United States for a month towards the end of the summer holidays, and wanted Mother to go with him, it had at first all seemed to work out beautifully. Jenny and Jeremy went off to stay with one of Jeremy's school friends who had a farm in Yorkshire, and Mary was to go to Aunt Sue, who had

three children aged eleven, eight and four, and who lived within an hour's car ride of the sea.

But then, on the very day that Jenny and Jeremy had left, came the letter from Aunt Sue, saying that Uncle Gil and the two elder children were down with flu, and that consequently Aunt Sue did not feel able to risk having Mary, quite apart from all the extra work she herself was having to do. . . .

So there it was. And once more the twins had got the best of it. Mary didn't grudge them the harvesting, the tractors, even the share they would have in the two elderly farm ponies; but she did think that at the very worst she might have been allowed to go and catch the flu. At least she would have been having it in company.

To Mary, sitting alone by the window on that gray autumn afternoon, flu seemed a very desirable thing indeed. She forgot about temperatures, aching bones, bed; she even forgot how tiresome Timothy, aged four, could be. She only saw in her mind's eye the lovely time they would all have had together

getting better, with books and games and plenty of talk and fun. She brooded over the picture, and for the fiftieth time wished to goodness she had managed to get to Aunt Sue's and catch the flu before the letter came that had sent her mother frantically to the telephone, and resulted in Mary's being bundled off—rather apologetically—to stay with Great-aunt Charlotte in the quiet old house in the country.

Nothing, thought Mary, *nothing* could ever happen here. If only it had been time to go to school —even school would have been better than this. . . .

And she scowled out of the window at the garden, where the falling leaves were rustling into a pattern on the lawn.

Great-aunt Charlotte, who was old, kind and very deaf, lived in a rambling red-brick house called Red Manor deep in Shropshire, in western England, surrounded by woods and cherry orchards. The orchards had once belonged to the house, but now were worked by a local firm of market gardeners,

who kept the gates locked, and one wasn't supposed to go into the orchards at all.

Save for an elderly friend and companion, Miss Marjoribanks (pronounced Marshbanks), and an elderly Pekingese called K'ung Fû-tsze (pronounced Confucius), Great-aunt Charlotte lived alone. To be sure, there was Zebedee, the old man who did the garden, but all the same, it was not a very exciting prospect for Miss Mary Smith, aged ten, and rather shy.

Miss Mary Smith was critically examining her tongue in the bedroom mirror.

It looked very healthy. And she felt fine.

She put it in, sighed, then put it out again at her reflection, and went downstairs to find something to do.

Miss Marjoribanks was in the drawing room, sorting embroidery silks on the wide window seat. There was a rather poor fire in the grate, and in front of this sat Confucius, sulking a little and digesting his lunch. Great-aunt Charlotte was sitting in her wing chair to one side of the fire, presumably also

digesting her lunch, but looking a great deal more pleasant about it than Confucius. She was asleep.

Mary tiptoed across to the window seat.

She sat down quietly.

She watched Miss Marjoribanks disentangle a length of puce silk from a skein of soft rust-red. The colors were horrible together. Miss Marjoribanks twisted and shook and tugged, and finally cheated by cutting both silks with the embroidery scissors. She began to wind them on little twists of newspaper.

Mary opened her mouth to whisper an offer of help.

Immediately Miss Marjoribanks fixed her with a faded pale blue eye. "Sssh!" she hissed. "You'll wake Confucius!" She moved the box of silks a little further away from Mary. "And Confucius," she added as an afterthought, "will wake your great-aunt."

"But—" began Mary.

"Sssh!" said Miss Marjoribanks.

Mary tiptoed out of the drawing room, and took at least two and a half minutes to close the door

without a sound. She went slowly down the passage to the back door, and out into the garden.

If Mary had not been searching for Zebedee, the gardener, it is probable that she would never have seen him, for, like all good gardeners, he seemed to be not a person, but merely a part of the landscape. In his faded jacket and battered old hat, with string knotted round the knees of his trousers, he looked like something that had been left lying about in the potting shed; under the shadow of the awful old hat his cheekbones were plant-pot-red, and the backs of his gnarled old hands, where the veins and bones were all a tangle, could have been twisted out of the same yellow raffia he used to tie up the chrysanthemums.

Which is what he was doing when at last Mary found him.

A shaft of autumn sunshine had parted the gray overcast sky and was gilding the trees and the fallen leaves that rustled as she walked across the lawn. In front of a tall hedge of cypress the chrysanthemums nodded heads of bronze and copper and sulphur-

yellow, while from them and from the earth and dead leaves and the tangle of bright nasturtiums round their roots, came the sad, beautiful smell of autumn.

Old Zebedee, pausing for a moment in his work, peered at her through the flowers with bright old eyes, like a robin, but he said nothing. The tousled heads of the chrysanthemums nodded as he pulled the raffia round the stems and knotted it. He bent down again and vanished behind the flowers.

Mary stood at the edge of the lawn, and spoke hesitatingly. "Can I help tie them up too?"

The chrysanthemums shook again, and a ball of raffia flew out towards her.

She picked it up and took a doubtful step forward. Zebedee's awful old hat reappeared suddenly three clumps further down the border, behind an enormous scarlet dahlia; his back was towards her, and his hands rustled busily down among the leaves.

Mary glanced again at the ball of raffia, decided that it must be an invitation to help, and, pushing aside the Michaelmas daisies and the big, flaring

dahlias, made her way to the back of the border among the chrysanthemums.

She began slowly, carefully, to knot the raffia to the stakes, and then to thread it round the stems of the plants so that the leaves would not be crushed. Old Zebedee had vanished again, but—as if it were his familiar spirit—a robin flew out of the cypress hedge and perched on a dahlia stake, watching her with the same old bright eyes.

The shaft of sunlight moved slowly through the colored tangle of flowers and fading leaves. The Virginia creeper on the walls of the Manor glinted richly like silk tapestry, and the tall chimneys, catching the late sun, glowed warmly against the pewter-dark sky behind them.

Then Mary, pulling the raffia too tightly, broke the stem of a chrysanthemum.

It was a tall plant, perhaps the tallest and finest of all, and it went with a snap that almost echoed in the still air. The huge amber-gold mop of blossom hung dismally, dragging on the earth and rotting leaves.

Mary stared in dismay.

And suddenly, as suddenly as he had vanished, old Zebedee appeared at her elbow, surveying the wreck of his prize with disgust and anger.

"I ought'a known better," he said bitterly, and his voice, like the rest of him, was part of the garden. It was thin and wheezy but queerly musical, like the wind in the eaves. "I ought'a known better. Children and dogs be no manner of use to a garden. You best let be."

"I'm sorry," said Mary dolefully, and, handing him back his raffia ball, she turned disconsolately away.

She found a gap in the cypress hedge, and a wicket gate giving on a path that wound away from the garden into the surrounding woods.

This she followed, aimlessly, with her loneliness pressing harder and harder upon her as she went on through the greenish shadow, her feet noiseless upon the damp carpet of brown and yellow leaves. To one side a young oak thrust a fistful of acorns over the path, with the last pale leaves fluttering round

them, ready to fall. In a cup made by the crotch of a beech root stood a pool of black water, where a thistle puff floated. Above this, like a roof, jutted the orange fans of some big fungus, and pallid toadstools crowded together in damp bunches among the moss and mud and rotting twigs.

Everywhere was damp, and decay, and the end of summer.

Mary stopped, and the silence of the dying woods hung heavily round her. An acorn, falling from its cup on to the mosses, dropped, in that stillness, with a tap loud enough to make her jump.

Then suddenly, neat and quiet and graceful as a dancer, there strolled into the middle of the path a small black cat.

He was completely black from ears to tail tip; his toes were black, and his whiskers, and the aristocratic eyebrow hairs that stood above his green, green eyes.

He stood in the very middle of the path, and he looked at Mary. Then his mouth opened to show a triangle of pink tongue and very white teeth, and he made a remark.

Probably a very ordinary remark, thought Mary, like "How do you do?" or "Nice day, isn't it?" And he obviously expected an answer, so she said, "How do you do? My name's Mary Smith. What's yours?"

The cat made no reply. There were more important things to do. He turned his back on Mary, with his tail held politely in the air, and walked away down the path, deeper into the wood. But he walked, not as if he were leaving her, but as if he wanted her to follow him.

Mary, delighted to have found a companion where she least expected, followed, but without attempting to touch the cat. To stroke him as you might have stroked an ordinary cat would have seemed insulting.

And presently the cat turned aside from the path, slipped under a hanging huddle of snowberries, and leaped on to a fallen branch of oak. He balanced there, looking back at Mary as with some difficulty she pushed past the snowberry bush.

She approached the oak branch. The cat did not move, but watched her closely.

Then she gave an exclamation of surprise and pleasure. For there in the hidden corner behind the snowberries, growing in the shelter of the fallen bough, was a little clump of flowers such as she had never seen before.

The leaves, set in stiff rosettes, were of a curious bluish-green, mottled like frogs, and above them on slender stems hung the flowers, clusters of graceful purple bells, whose throats were streaked with silver, and whose pistils, like long tongues, thrust out of the freaked throats in stabs of bright gold.

Mary knelt down on the fallen branch and gazed at the flowers, while beside her sat the little black cat, waving his black tail, and watching her out of his green, green eyes.

2

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

The little cat, dignified as ever, was still with Mary when at length she came back to the house, bearing in one hand a single stem of the strange purple flower that she had found in the wood.

She went through the back way and found old Zebedee in the kitchen, sitting on a box, with an ancient, crusted-looking pail gripped between his knees. This was full of some thick steaming mess, at which he pounded fiercely with a stick. He still had on his awful old hat.

He peered at her from under the brim. Mary, remembering the broken chrysanthemum, approached him a little nervously, holding out the purple flower.

"Do you know what this is, please?" she asked, hesitating. "I found it in the wood. I've never seen anything like it before."

Zebedee's bright eyes regarded her. He did not seem to be bearing any malice about the broken plant. He chuckled. "Aye. It do grow down in the

wood, surely. Though I've not laid eye to it for many a year. Where did you get it?"

"Not far from the path. Actually, the cat found it."

"The cat?" repeated Zebedee. "Oh, aye."

The little black cat looked at him, aloofly, and began to wash a whisker.

"What's he called?" asked Mary.

Old Zebedee began to stir the contents of the bucket again. "He don't come to the house much, the cat," he said. "He don't rightly belong here; he just came in one day, out of the wood. I calls him Tib."

"Tib," said Mary, experimenting.

The cat stopped washing for a moment, flicked her a glance, and then went on massaging his ear.

"Two of 'em, there was," said Zebedee. "Black 'un and gray, but the same size, same eyes, and like as two peas. Tib and Gib, I called them."

"I haven't seen a gray one."

Zebedee nodded. "I seen the pair of 'em last week, side by side on the vicarage wall in the dark,

like a pair of owls. I reckon they must be twins."

Mary glanced at Tib. He had stopped washing and was sitting perfectly still, watching her. His eyes looked greener than ever.

"I do hope he stays here!" she said. "Tib, you will stay with me, won't you? They don't *belong* to the vicarage, do they, Zebedee?"

"Cats doesn't belong," said Zebedee. "They goes where they wants to. Gib-cat's keeping the vicar's kitchen warm, I reckon, but this little black 'un—been haunting the garden here regular for days. Mebbe he'll settle here now he's got company."

"Well, if he'll stay, he and I can go and look for Gib tomorrow." said Mary. "It'll be something to—I'll enjoy doing that. And he seems pretty good at finding things. Do you know the name of the flower?"

Old Zebedee dug in the bucket with his stick. He chuckled again. "First time as ye goes into the wood," he said, "and ye finds it." He peered, nodding at the stem of blossom. "Aye, that's her, a rare

one, surely, and sought for high and low. 'Tis the only place she grows, they say, and she only flowers once in seven years."

Mary stared at him. "Only once in seven years?"

"Aye. A rare one, surely." He gave another of those bright glances. "And I mind the folk saying, years back, that there was magic in her."

"Magic?"

"It be but a tale, a country tale," said Zebedee. "The flower, she be in the books, likely enough, with a grand name as long as your arm, and foreign at that. But with her flowering at the seventh year, and at the time when the other flowers is dying—well, superstitious folks called her magic. And 'tis said that in the olden days the witches sought her from the corners of the Black Mountains, and from the place where the old city was and there's now nought but a pool o' water."

The words fell queerly in the clean, everyday kitchen, with bright packets of soap powder on a shelf, and a rack of aluminum pans above them, and

with the late pale shaft of the sun falling across the scrubbed floor.

Mary stared down at the flowers clustered on the slender stem, and in the small draught from the door the purple heads stirred, and the golden tongues moved in the silver throats.

"A magic flower. . . ." She touched a pistil gently with a forefinger. "Look, Zebedee, the gold comes off. What's the flower's name?"

"I don't know the name in the books," said the old man, "but when I was a lad she had names aplenty—dragon tongue, witch's bells, tibsroot—"

"Tibsroot!" cried Mary. "That's the cat! Tib! He found it for me!"

Old Zebedee chuckled again. "Likely he's a witch's cat," he said indulgently. "He do look like one, surely. That be why I called him Tib. Likely his name's Blackie or Smuts or Sooty, after all."

"He *looks* like a Tib," said Mary stoutly. "And I'm sure he's a magic cat. Look how he found the magic flower for me—the tibsroot."

"That's one name for it," said Zebedee. "I calls it fly-by-night."

"Why?"

But he would not answer, and when she questioned him, he only stirred his bucket so violently that at last she said, "What's in the bucket, Zebedee?"

"Pollard for the hens," he said shortly. "Nasty critters. Nasty, mean pecking critters, hens. I hates hens." And, picking up his bucket, he stumped out of the kitchen.

Mary watched him go, then turned to look for Tib. But the kitchen was empty, and when she ran to the back door to peer out into the yard, that was empty, too.

The little black cat had vanished.

It was late that night, when Mary had been in bed for some time, and when she should certainly have been asleep, that the queer thing happened.

She had woken, drowsy and warm from her first sleep, and was just turning over towards the window,

when she heard it. Distant, over the trees. A swish like the swoop of wind.

That's funny, thought Mary. There isn't any wind. There must be a storm coming. What a pity, when I was going with Tib tomorrow—

The noise came again, louder, nearer. A long shrill rush of wind, with a whistle in it, and all along the wall of the house the Virginia creeper swished as if giant fingers had swept through it, and the windows rattled.

Mary stiffened, her skin tingling.

Then, suddenly, the scream. A thud, and the scream checked as if the screamer had bitten through his tongue. Silence.

And as Mary, with every inch of her flesh crawling with goose pimples, sat slowly up in bed, staring at the window, there came a faint scrabbling noise on the sill.

Rigid with fright, she sat motionless, then slowly, slowly reached out a hand to the switch of the bedside light. She found it, took a deep breath, and pressed it. The room sprang into light, and the black

sky outside the window drew back. But something, black as the night sky, moved upon the windowsill. Something tapped and scrabbled at the window. Two eyes glared. . . .

Mary's breath went out in a great sigh of relief as she flung herself out of bed and ran towards the window. "Tib! Tib! Oh Tib, what a fright you gave me!"

She threw open the bottom of the window, and the little black cat leaped into the room. Ignoring Mary, he stalked into the middle of the carpet and stood there, his tail lashing, his fur stiff with fury, his eyes as bright as traffic lights.

Mary bent over him. "Tib, what's the matter? What's happened?"

Tib took no notice of her. His fur still bristled like a hearth brush; the green eyes still glared at the window. Mary switched off the light, then went back to the window and stared out into the dark garden.

The trees were a dim shadowed huddle beyond the lawn. The hanging clouds above them had with-

drawn a little, to show, beyond, a faint inlay of silver stardust. The air was motionless. On the darkness of the lawn below, nothing stirred.

It had only been a gust of wind, after all.

And the thud, the scream? Mary closed the window and, picking up Tib, began to smooth his angry fur. A cat fight, probably. They did scream, terribly, when they fought. Perhaps Gib had come back, and they had had a quarrel. Even twins quarreled sometimes. Jenny and Jeremy certainly did.

"We'll find him tomorrow, and then you'll have to make it up," she told Tib.

She climbed back into bed, and Tib, purring suddenly, curled warm and soft against her.

Just as the two of them were settling down to sleep together, Mary thought of something. "Tib," she said, whispering in the dark against the velvet fur, "Tib. *How did you get up there on my windowsill?*"

Tib, settling a purring nose among his curled black paws, did not reply.

3

ONE MISTY, MOISTY MORNING

The morning, again, was gray. The clouds, which during the night had sifted so beautifully away from the stars, had closed again, and the dahlias hung heavy scarlet heads in the still air.

Mary could see them from the breakfast-room window, deep red against the cypress hedge. Tib, who had come downstairs with her, was not interested in the dahlias. He had demanded—and received—a saucer of milk, which Mary rather guiltily hoped he would finish before Miss Marjoribanks came down to breakfast. Great-aunt Charlotte, who never fussed about anything, always breakfasted in her bedroom.

"Hurry, Tib, please," whispered Mary.

But Tib was enjoying his breakfast and was not going to hurry for anyone. His small pink tongue took up the milk in the daintiest, tiniest laps imaginable, all from the very edge of the saucer. And at least a quarter of every lap—Mary noticed with dismay—was going over on to the floor.

Miss Marjoribanks' voice sounded briskly from

the doorway. "Good morning, my dear. Have you had your breakfast?"

Mary jumped and turned. Tib took no notice, except to lap a little more milk on to the floor.

"Good morning, Miss Marjoribanks. No, not yet."

"Marshbanks," said that lady crisply. "Well, come along, sit down. We'll have it together." Apparently she hadn't noticed Tib and his saucer. She moved briskly towards the head of the table. All her movements as a rule were as brisk and decided as her speech, but Mary noticed, as she followed her to the table, that there was a certain air of carefulness this morning in the way Miss Marjoribanks walked, which indicated an unusual stiffness of the joints. Indeed, Miss Marjoribanks sat down with what could only be called the most extreme caution.

Tib, who had finished his milk now, drew Miss Marjoribanks' attention by thanking Mary politely, and then jumping on to the window seat where, with the utmost self-possession, he began to wash his face.

And Miss Marjoribanks, far from looking cross, was eyeing him uneasily—almost (thought Mary) nervously. "That cat," she said sharply, "does not belong to the house. How did it get in?"

Tib looked at Mary. Mary decided to respect his confidence. "I had him in my room," she said truthfully. "He must have come into the house in the night."

Miss Marjoribanks looked at Tib again, and Tib resumed his washing in an odiously detached manner. The expression on his face could only be described as a smirk. Miss Marjoribanks looked away, and moved uneasily in her chair.

"I'm sure," she said, "that your Great-aunt Charlotte would not like it, dear, your having a cat in your bedroom. But perhaps"—she paused over her scrambled egg and turned her sharp, pale-blue gaze on Mary—"perhaps you are a little lonely here, with just a lot of old people?"

Mary began politely to protest, but Miss Marjoribanks cut her short.

"Of course you are! And it's quite understand-

able, my dear, quite understandable." She nodded kindly at Mary. "Such a pity the vicar is away on vacation now. It would have been splendid for you to have a playmate. . . ."

It seemed a little odd to Mary (remembering the nice, silver-haired old clergyman who had taken matins last Sunday) that even Miss Marjoribanks should consider him a suitable playmate for a ten-year-old, but Miss Marjoribanks obviously knew very little about children.

Suddenly Mary remembered what Zebedee had told her about the two cats on the vicarage wall. Perhaps Tib and Gib belonged there and had come wandering over here to find food? Perhaps Gib was still out in the woods, alone and hungry? She glanced at Tib, to see that he had stopped washing, and was watching her attentively, as if he could follow her thoughts.

"Is the vicarage empty?" she asked.

"Oh, no," said Miss Marjoribanks. "No, indeed. Old Mr. Spenser—whom you saw on Sunday—is living there while the vicar and his family are

away. The poor vicar can't just go away for a vacation and leave his parish, you know. He has to find someone to take the services for him."

"Oh, I see." Mary fastened on the one thing that mattered. "There are children, then?"

"One—a son, Peter. About your age, I think. *Such* a pity," said Miss Marjoribanks again, "that they're away."

"When will they be back?"

"That I cannot say, my dear. But perhaps I can find out today. Which brings me to what I had to tell you." She set down her cup and began to roll up her table napkin. "Today your great-aunt and I have promised to go and see an old friend, so I am afraid that you will be left quite alone."

"I shall be all right," said Mary. "I'll play with Tib, and help in the garden, and—and things."

The companion patted her hand. "Tomorrow we will think out something for you."

At this moment Great-aunt Charlotte came in. "Dear child," she said comfortably, kissing Mary. "How are you this morning?"

Mary admitted that she was much the same as yesterday.

"And did you sleep well?" asked Great-aunt Charlotte, in the calm, flat voice of the very deaf.

"Very well, thank you, Aunt Charlotte. I woke up once—"

"What woke you?" asked Miss Marjoribanks sharply.

Mary was startled at her tone. "Oh, a noise—a cat fight, I think," she said, and Miss Marjoribanks sat back, apparently satisfied. "And an awful thump," added Mary.

"A lump?" said Great-aunt Charlotte. "In your bed? Oh dear, that will never do."

"Not a lump, Aunt Charlotte, a *thump!*" said Mary loudly.

Further explanations were prevented by the entry into the breakfast room, wheezing and waddling, of Great-aunt Charlotte's elderly and—we might as well admit it—rather unpleasant dog, Confucius.

At one and the same moment Confucius saw Tib, and Tib saw Confucius.

"Oh dear!" said Great-aunt Charlotte, making an ineffectual grab for Confucius.

"Oh dear me!" cried Miss Marjoribanks, starting to rise briskly from her chair, then, with a wince, rising rather slowly.

"Oh!" cried Mary, who did not care at all for Confucius, but a good deal for Tib.

But nobody need have worried. Tib, the witch's cat, merely gave the Pekingese what will have to be described as A Look, and Confucius, who had darted forward, slobbering with pleasure and excitement, stopped short, remembered that he had a pressing engagement elsewhere, and went out with what was supposed to be careless dignity, but looked like a hasty shuffle.

Tib smirked, tidied away a whisker, and suggested to Mary that she should open the window to let him take his morning stroll across the lawn.

So it came about that soon after Great-aunt Charlotte and her companion had driven away to visit the old friend, Mary went out into the garden to look for Tib and Zebedee.

Tib was nowhere to be seen, but she found Zebedee straight away. He was wheeling a barrow along between the lawn and the side of the house.

"Good morning," said Mary. "Please, have you seen Tib anywhere?"

Zebedee shook his head and went on trundling. Mary trotted along beside the barrow.

"We were going to look for Cib today, you see," she explained, "only Tib went out after breakfast, and I can't find him anywhere."

"Happen he'll turn up," said Zebedee, still trundling. "Cats do."

"Can I help you again, please?"

"And break me flowers, likely?" said Zebedee, but he gave her a not unpleasant look from beneath the brim of the awful hat.

"No, truly. Isn't there something I can do?"

Zebedee set down the barrow and took out of it a spade, a fork and a garden broom made of twigs tied to a stout handle.

"There be leaves to sweep," he said, and handed her the broom. "A bad untidy month this

be, September. There. Happen you can't do much harm sweeping—if you don't break my broomstick forbye."

He gave the little wheeze that passed for a chuckle, and taking the spade he began to dig the border under the windows of the house.

Mary began to sweep up the leaves.

It sounded such a simple job, but soon she discovered, as she struggled with the enormous broom, that it was not only difficult, but nearly impossible. She began by trying to sweep round her in great half circles, but the leaves merely curled under the broom twigs and rustled happily back into their drifts under the trees. Then she seized the broomstick—which was some inches taller than she was—just above the head of twigs, and tried sweeping in short upright strokes, but this was exhausting, and merely seemed to have the effect of scattering the leaves further afield.

And when she had at last scraped together a respectable pile of leaves, Tib, suddenly reappearing from somewhere, flung himself into the middle of it,

rolled over twice, threw two pawfuls of dead leaves into the air, turned round three times, and darted off sideways with his tail held up like a question mark.

"Oh, Tib!" cried Mary, in exasperation. "And you needn't think I'm coming to play with you now, after that! You can just wait till I've finished this job!"

So she labored on, and at length managed to get a good pile of leaves into the barrow, which she trundled off the way Tib had gone, towards the compost heap by the wall of the kitchen garden.

She could not manage to tip the barrow, but she scooped her load out somehow and then was about to take up the shafts for the return journey, when her eye was caught by something flung carelessly among the sticks and rubbish waiting to be burned further along the wall.

It was a little broomstick.

Mary ran to pull the little broom off the pile. It was just a perfect size for her, light and wieldy, with a head of good stiff birch twigs. Pleased, she flung it on

the barrow, and wheeled her find back to the lawn.

"Zebedee, look what I've found!" she called, but the old gardener was once again invisible.

And so was Tib. At least Mary thought so, until a crackling and swaying high up in a lime tree showed her the small black cat balancing delicately along a high bough.

"Do be careful, Tib!" she cried, but soon, seeing how easily and lightly he moved, she went back to her task, and the leaves piled up in obedient drifts under the strokes of the little broomstick.

The day, though gray, was sultry, and over the heavy-hanging leaves of the trees the sky brooded low, in great sagging spans of cloud. Now and again, rustling in the still air, leaves of lime and oak and copper beech would release their hold and come floating down to swell the drifts of rust and ochre on the lawn. Somewhere, shrilly, the robin began to sing.

One more barrow load, thought Mary, then she would call Tib down from the lime tree, and they would go off together into the woods.

She paused in her work and stood for a moment, leaning on the broomstick. The day was certainly warm. She pushed the hair back out of her eyes and, as she did so, noticed a gleam of purple in the grass. A single fly-by-night flower was lying there. It must have fallen yesterday as she carried her prize home.

She picked it up.

But the flower, grown soft, crushed in her hand, and on her fingers the juice from its petals ran purple and red, and gold dusty from the yellow tongue. She dropped the squashed flower into her pocket and rubbed her sticky hand sharply down the handle of the broom.

Then it happened.

At the touch of the purple juice the little broomstick gave a leap, a violent twist, a kick like the kick of a pony. Instinctively Mary clung to it, but it had twisted between her legs, and she fell.

But she never reached the ground.

For as she tipped forward, clinging along the handle of the little broom, with the head of twigs

between her knees, the broomstick reared, shook itself violently, and then soared up towards the tree-tops with a swish like the rustle of a little wind.

And as it tore past the upper boughs, with Mary clinging for dear life to the handle, there was a scream and a crackle of twigs, and, with paws stretched like a flying squirrel, Tib flung himself out of the lime tree and on to the back of the broom. The broomstick jerked slightly under the impact, and then tore on, up, straight as a spear, towards the sagging clouds.

4

UP ABOVE THE WORLD SO HIGH

Then all at once they had reached the cloud, had burst through its low edges, and were tearing through the swirling gray. What had seemed to be a canopy of cloud sagging like wet canvas proved, as the flying broomstick speared into it, to be a whirling, tossing mass of lighted foam. The broomstick rode it like a sea, ripping soundlessly through the foggy eddies, while the mist streamed out behind like spindrift in a speedboat's wake.

"Oh, Tib!" screamed Mary, and her words were whirled away to drown in the rushing cloud. "Tib, what shall we do? It's a *witch's broom!*"

There was no answer from Tib, and Mary, alarmed in case he had fallen in their mad flight upward, twisted her head to look. This made the broomstick rock so violently that, terrified, she gave up the attempt, and concentrated all her attention on gripping the shaft of the broom with hands and knees.

But out of the corner of her eye she had caught a glimpse of Tib, flattened along the broom twigs like a black slug, his claws driven deep into the wood,

his green eyes blazing, and his black tail streaming behind like a pennant.

Then suddenly, with a rush like an elevator, they hurtled up out of the mist into the blazing sunshine. The broomstick, slackening speed, leveled off and began to cruise smoothly along over the upper surface of the cloud. Above them arched the immense and brilliant sky, and around, on every hand as far as the eye could reach, stretched a dazzle of cloud like a floor of living snow and tossing rainbow spray.

Mary gasped with wonder, fear and excitement, as her strange steed sailed easily across the sparkling floor of the sky. "And I said nothing could happen! But Tib, how on earth do we get *down?*"

As if in reply, the broomstick veered slightly to the left, and Mary heard Tib spit with annoyance as a clawhold slipped.

Straight ahead towered a cumulus cloud, a thunderhead. It seemed to be bearing down upon them, slowly, like a majestic and enormous iceberg thrusting through piling floes. But between the

white sea over which they sailed, and the flashing base of the thunderhead, Mary could glimpse a gulf, a great dark green gap in the cloud, like a chasm. Towards this, with a quiver that shook it from tip to bristles, the magic broomstick headed at an increasing rate.

"Tib!" shrieked Mary. "Hang on! I think we're doing down—Oh!"

This last exclamation as the broomstick, with a sudden rush, flew straight out from the edge of cloud, over the green gulf that fell away below.

Mary caught a glimpse, framed in a ring of cloud, of green country, silver threaded with rivers, stretched like a map away beneath. Then the whole expanse veered, tilted, and swung up as the broomstick dropped its nose and went into a long dive.

Down, down, down . . . and the air tore the breath out of her body as she tried to crouch closer to the broomstick. Down, down, down, and the green-and-silver map came rushing up to meet her . . . became green hills and curving rivers . . . became woods and fields and hedgerows . . . became copses

and trees and banks of flowers . . . till presently she was sailing past the leafy treetops, and the broomstick, leveling out once more, ran at a rapidly dwindling speed above the hedges of a curling lane.

The hedge on the left gave way to a high wall with a gate in it, a huge gate flanked by pillars where stone griffins ramped. The gate was shut, but the little broomstick sailed easily over it, missed a griffin's upraised paw by about six inches, then cruised across the wooded park towards a distant glimpse of chimneys at the end of the long driveway.

Soon Mary could see the house clearly. It was a biggish building, which looked as if it had once been a castle. It was built of gray stone and had battlements, but in places it had been mended with red brick, and the top of the biggest tower had been taken off and replaced with a glass dome shaped like an onion, while yet another tower had a flat roof with something jutting from it that looked uncommonly like a diving board.

In the center of the main block of the building was a wide flight of steps leading up to a big door. To

one side of this center block stretched a lower wing of buildings; these were one story high and looked modern. On the other side, the right as they approached, was what looked like the old stable yard; this was a cobbled courtyard green with weeds, surrounded by stables and coach house and approached from the park by an arched tunnel crowned with a clock tower, where a gilded weathercock spun in an agitated manner.

As if, thought Mary, the little broomstick were a magnet, and its approach set a compass needle spinning.

The broomstick banked to avoid the clock tower, skimmed the coach-house roof, then sank smoothly down to a perfect landing.

Somewhere, excitedly, a cock was crowing.

Mary's feet went thankfully out to either side to touch the solid earth.

"Oh, Tib—" she began again, but never finished the sentence, because the little broomstick proceeded, quite methodically, to buck her off.

At the first buck Tib sprang, with a startled

hiss, to the ground. At the second Mary, flying through the air, landed with a thump on the weedy cobbles, right at the feet of a little man who, from his seat on an ancient mounting block, had watched the whole proceeding with a complete lack of surprise.

5

RIDE A COCKHORSE

He was a strange little man, not a dwarf, but made on so small a scale, so thin and wizened and bent in on himself, that he was scarcely as big as Mary. He had a sharp, brown face, lined and seamed like cracked leather, and his eyes were small and green and shining. He was dressed in wrinkled breeches and an old green jacket.

As Mary, feeling shaken, puzzled, and remarkably foolish, picked herself up from the cobbles, the little man took a straw from his mouth and spoke. "You'll be needing a few lessons," he said.

Mary, dusting down her coat, stared at him. "Lessons?"

He nodded. "Riding lessons. You shouldn't have tumbled off like that—though it's not a good ride, that broom. Tricky. You were lucky to get as far as this."

Here he addressed the broomstick sharply, in what sounded like a foreign language. It had been frisking about nearby, but when the little man spoke it dropped to the ground and lay still. He got off the mounting block and picked it up.

"But I don't understand!" cried Mary. "Who are you? Where *is* this? How did it happen?"

"Me? Danny Flanagan's me name," said the little man. He patted the broomstick, and tucked it under one arm. "It'll stand quiet now, but we'd better be putting it in the stable till you'll be wanting it again. Come and I'll show you."

And, carrying the broomstick, he led the way across the yard to where a half door stood shut and bolted across the dark interior of a stable. He undid the half door and led the way in. Mary followed. In the shaft of sunlight that sloped through the open door, motes of dust danced like fireflies. The floor was of ribbed stone, and there was a pleasing muddle of boxes and straw and sacks and ropes, such as may be found in any stable. There were even empty hayracks fixed to the wall. But no horses.

Against the wall opposite the door, each in a little compartment like a bicycle stand, stood about a dozen brooms. Some were battered, and old-fashioned in design like Mary's, while some looked almost new.

Towards these Mr. Flanagan, as he propped

Mary's broomstick between two big, rather grubby garden brooms, gestured with contempt.

"Modern stuff," he said, with a twist of his leathery face. "Made yesterday, that's what it is, and of what? Not twigs, no, not good birch like a solid well-bred broom. All sorts of fancy stuff they're using now, with the grand names to it, like you'll get in Madam's labs. It's the likes of them that'll take the bread and butter out of me mouth."

"Why?" asked Mary.

"It's me job," said Mr. Flanagan simply. "All me life I've taught riding. And I mean rale, genu-ine riding, that's not just pulling of levers and pushing of knobs, but how to stick on, whatever happens, in all the weathers, at all speeds—and how to be managing a bucking broomstick at a thousand feet or so on a moonless midnight, with a storm coming up—" He nodded at Mary, his green eyes glittering. "*That's* riding," he said. "And you, my girl, have a lot to learn about it. I misremember seeing you before. How long have you been coming for lessons?"

"For lessons?" echoed Mary blankly. "I-I've

never been before. You mean *riding* lessons on that broomstick?"

"Fine I know you've had no riding lessons from me," said Mr. Flanagan. "Or you'd not have been falling off at me feet the way you'd make a hole in the yard. No, it's the other lessons you'll be having at the College."

"College?" echoed Mary again. "What College?"

As they talked they had made their way out of the stable. Mr. Flanagan pointed across the yard to where, under the clock tower, the arched tunnel led from the stable yard out into the park. To one side of the archway was a notice fastened to the wall.

ENDOR COLLEGE
All Examinations Coached for
by a Competent Staff
of Fully Qualified Witches.

Under the Supervision of
Madam Mumblechook M.M., B. Sorc.,
Headmistress.

"That's it," said Mr. Flanagan. "That's the College, and one of the best of its kind. And now you'd better be getting along. You don't want to be late for classes on your first day, do you now?"

"But I don't want—" Mary was interrupted by the sound of a bell, which came from somewhere inside the building.

"Hurry up!" cried Mr. Flanagan. "That's the first bell. It's three minutes you've got now, and they'll be looking for you."

He took her by the arm and urged her towards the archway.

"But I'd much rather stay here and talk to you!" cried Mary, hanging back. "I don't have to go in, do I? There's been some mistake. They're not really expecting me at all."

"Sure and they are. Everybody knows you're here. Didn't you hear the alarm cock?" As he hurried her forward, Mr. Flanagan nodded to the bright weather cock overhead. "And it whirling round on its stick like it would be taking off for the moon or the gardens of Jerusalem? Come along now, me

dear, don't be nervous. Your little cat's there already."

Mary saw that this, indeed, was true. Tib was ahead of them, trotting out of the archway into the sunlight of the park. He stopped and looked back. He looked alert and eager, as if this (thought poor Mary) was what he had been all along expecting to do.

"And that reminds me," said Mr. Flanagan at her elbow, "don't be overlooking this, me dear. It's very strict they are, very strict indeed." He pointed to another small but forbidding notice, which was fastened to the outer wall of the archway. It read,

Familiars Not Allowed in the Park
Except on Leash.

Mr. Flanagan bobbed down like a diving duck and came up with an indignant Tib. "Have ye got a lead?"

"No, I haven't. Besides, that's not a familiar, that's Tib."

"Not a familiar? Black as he is, and with the eyes on him like emeralds? You'll be telling me next you're not a witch, and fine we both know that you'd never have got that broomstick this far, and you with no lessons either, unless you'd a powerful spell in your hand. Quick, now, there's the other bell. Tie some string on him, and get away in. Hurry!"

His haste was so catching, and her own bewilderment so great, that almost without thinking Mary put her hand in her coat pocket and brought out a length of old Zebedee's raffia. On this Mr. Flanagan pounced with a sound of satisfaction, and, before she knew exactly what was happening, Mary found herself walking across a wide gravel sweep towards the great door of the house, with one end of the raffia clutched tightly in her hand, and Tib—rather offended and very dignified—stalking ahead of her with the other end loosely tied round his neck. The air was very still, and very quiet. Not a single bird, not one, was singing in the trees.

And now they were at the foot of the wide flight of steps that led up to the front door. There were

griffins here, too. They sat on their stone pedestals, one at each side of the steps. On the right-hand pedestal Mary saw yet another notice. It read simply:

TRESPASSERS
WILL BE
TRANSFORMED

Mary stared, stopped dead, then turned quickly to look behind her.

Mr. Flanagan was nowhere to be seen. And as he went back to his stable yard, he had shut the gate behind him. The archway was barred by a solid slab of studded oak.

Then the front door of the College opened, and a tall woman in black came out onto the head of the steps. She beckoned to Mary.

Mary looked at Tib. Tib looked back with no expression whatever in his green, green eyes.

The woman beckoned again.

Mary walked up the steps towards her.

6

WILL YOU WALK INTO MY PARLOR?

The woman on the steps was tall and handsome. She had black hair, wound into a big bun on the nape of her neck, and the skirt of her long black dress swept the ground. And she wore diamonds. Lots of diamonds. Rings, pendants, brooches, and earrings as big as dog daisies. Mary thought that she must be a queen, or at least a duchess, but it seemed as if Mr. Flanagan and the notices had told the truth, for the woman smiled pleasantly down at Mary, and said, "I am the headmistress, Madam Mumblechook. You may call me Madam."

"Thank you," said Mary politely, holding on tightly to Tib's leash.

"Welcome," said Madam Mumblechook in a deep, carrying voice, "to Endor College."

"Thank you," said Mary again, "but I'm not quite sure—"

"You are, of course," said the headmistress, with a piercing look, "a new pupil? When I saw you approach with your familiar"—she waved at Tib—"I realized at once that you were to be one of us. Not," she added thoughtfully, "a Trespasser?"

It was, Mary remembered, rather dangerous hereabouts to be a Trespasser. One was Transformed. And she had no intention whatever of being Transformed.

She said firmly, "I'm a new pupil, Madam."

"Excellent, excellent. I'm sure you'll do well and be very happy with us."

The headmistress turned and led the way into the building. There was a wide entrance hall, and to the left of this a door stood open on what was apparently an office. Mary could see a big desk, a shelf for books, and filing cabinets against the wall. On the door was painted, in black, the word *Headmistress*. It was comfortingly normal.

Madam Mumblechook paused by the office door. "Let me see now, are you boarding with us, or studying as a day pupil?"

"A day pupil, please," said Mary quickly.

"Ah, just so. Well, we must decide which grade to start you in. Then you can be duly enrolled. What is your name, my dear?"

"Mary Smith."

Madam Mumblechook looked at her thoughtfully. "Yes, of course. It always is. You are the sixty-third, I think. Or is it sixty-fourth?"

"Sixty-fourth what?" asked Mary, startled.

"The sixty-fourth Mary Smith," said Madam Mumblechook. "Most witches like to study under an alias. But never mind that now. Come and see the classrooms, and then we can discuss which courses to enroll you for."

From the rear of the hallway two corridors led off to left and right. Madam Mumblechook turned to the right. "The other way leads to the boarders' wing," she said, and Mary remembered the low, new-looking buildings she had glimpsed from the air. "The classrooms and laboratories are down this way. Come, Miss—er—Smith."

"But my name is *really* Mary Smith!" cried Mary, hurrying after her down a long corridor swimming in dim green shadow. The headmistress did not seem to have heard her. She was opening the door into what appeared to be a classroom.

But it was not like any classroom that Mary had

ever seen or even imagined. For one thing, it was dark—so dark that at first Mary could hardly make out any faces. Also it was small; there were only seven pupils. The light—what there was of it—came from a single candle, which burned with a bright green flame, and made the face of the teacher, who leaned over it, look very peculiar indeed.

The teacher was an old man who appeared—such was the curious light—to have green eyes, green hair and beard, and green skin. He looked very much as Mary had always imagined a merman would look, only older, greener, and—it must be admitted—much less wholesome, like something going moldy. He sat tapping a long, clawed finger on the table in front of him, keeping time to the chanting of the pupils in those dimly seen desks. They were chanting nursery rhymes, not the ordinary ones that Mary knew, but strange ones that went wrong here and there. It was as if the rhyme started out properly and then slipped somehow, so that the result was not ordinary, or even nice at all.

Take a crooked sixpence,
Crawl a crooked mile,
Lay it in the moonlight
On a crooked stile;
Get a crooked cat
To catch a crooked mouse,
And lock 'em up forever
In a little crooked house.

It must, Mary realized, be a spell or charm, but what kind of magic could this be for? Nothing, surely, to do with the flying broomstick and Tib, and the beautiful fly-by-night flower?

One two three four
Mary's at the College door;
Five six seven eight
Let her in and it's too late. . . .

The chanting wavered and died away as she and Madam Mumblechook stood in the doorway. Eight pairs of eyes—all apparently green—were

fixed on her. She felt a little frightened, but then a soft touch on her leg made her remember Tib, and she bent quickly to caress his fur. It was ruffled, as if he were excited or apprehensive too; but it was silky and real and comforting.

"This," said Madam, "is the first grade arts class. Spells of the simpler kind. Turning milk sour, blighting turnips, making the cows go dry. In the second term we progress further to such things as cramps, aches, and agues. The third term is devoted to revision and field work, and the examinations are in December." She paused. "The College has its flying lessons too. And that reminds me, my dear. There is no need to fly in past the stable yard; it upsets the alarm cock. You may have noticed our private landing strip on the north turret."

"I believe I did," said Mary.

"Then come in that way next time. Please go on with the class," she added to the teacher, and the chanting began again:

Ding Dong Bell,
Pussy's in the well;

She wouldn't have gone right in
But oh, but oh, she's terrible
terrible thin. . . .

Mary bent down quickly and touched Tib again, then raised her voice across the chanting, "You said something about laboratories, Madam. Do you have science courses?"

"Yes, indeed. We hold Advanced Study courses under one of the most distinguished of wizards, Doctor Dee. You will have heard of him. But have you reached science studies yet? You look very young."

"My father is a scientist," said Mary. "A professor."

Madam raised her brows. "Indeed? Where, may I ask?"

"Cambridge." Mary had to shout to make herself heard through the chanting of a very noisy spell about warts.

Madam looked definitely impressed. She led the way out of the classroom, and the door closed on the chanting. "Gormbridge? Then he must be a

warlock of the very highest order. No doubt your mother is equally accomplished?"

"Oh, yes. She was at Cambridge, too. She was one of Daddy's students."

"Really! So there is talent on both sides! Indeed we shall be happy to welcome you to Endor. A most promising recruit. Where are your parents now?"

"They're abroad, so they sent me to stay in the country for a while."

"And they sent you to me. I am flattered, very flattered. Of course we shall enroll you immediately. You must begin classes today. No doubt you have already studied some of the more difficult spells. You will already be well beyond our first grade."

"Blighting turnips and things? We don't use spells for that kind of thing now," said Mary, who was beginning to enjoy herself. "We use sprays."

"Methods change, methods change," said Madam, "but basically magic remains the same. One can do a tremendous amount of damage in a very short time, if one gets the ingredients right. Have you studied invisibility yet?"

"No," said Mary, "but I should like to."

This was true. It seemed that she was going to keep her end up well enough with the headmistress, so she might as well enjoy the adventure, and bluff the day through, and no doubt at the end of it would get the little broomstick to carry her home again.

But, she thought, remembering the weird green candle, and the moist eyes of the chanting pupils, and the nasty little songs they sang, she would never come back. Never. It might be exciting, and interesting, and quite harmless, but—she realized suddenly—she would rather be back at Red Manor, all alone, sweeping up the leaves on the autumn lawn.

Madam Mumblechook opened another classroom door. "Second grade. The invisibility class," she announced.

This classroom was quite different and looked much more normal. It was big, and had enormous windows through which the sunlight blazed. There was a dais with a long table for the teacher, and behind this a blackboard—a red blackboard, with

writing on it in yellow chalk. And there were rows of desks in front, about thirty all told. The room was deserted.

Mary was just about to ask where everyone was, when Madam Mumblechook said with obvious satisfaction, "Ah, I see the class is going very well. A hundred per cent. Very satisfactory. A good formula. Would you care to try it, Miss Smith?"

She pointed to the writing on the blackboard. This was spidery and not very easy to read, being written from corner to corner of the blackboard, instead of straight across. It was, moreover, in a foreign language.

Mary's newfound confidence ebbed abruptly. "I-I'm not sure that I would, at the moment, thank you," she said. Again she was just about to ask where the class was, when something began to happen that was stranger than anything she had yet seen.

Right in front of her, where there had been nothing but the empty dais and behind it the red blackboard—redboard, surely, thought Mary—someone seemed to be standing. A shadow only at

first, a sort of ghostly outline of a person in front of the sunshine. There was no color, only shape, and a sort of shimmer of personality, which slowly gathered substance till it became a smile on the face of a pleasant-looking man. Then all at once he was fully there, standing on the dais with one hand resting on a book which lay open on the table. In his other hand was a thin white stick, which Mary realized must be a wand. From time to time it hissed faintly, and green sparks spurted or dripped from its tip like drops from a leaking tap.

"Doctor Dee," said the headmistress, "this is Miss Mary Smith. She is to enroll with us, and I feel sure that she will become one of our most able scholars. Her parents both studied—*both* of them, Doctor Dee—at Gormbridge."

"What a splendid start!" said Doctor Dee, his eyes twinkling at Mary. "And what a splendid name. How do you do, Miss Mary Smith?"

"How do you do?" said Mary. "Actually, you know," she added, "it isn't Gormbridge; it's Cambridge."

"These local differences of pronunciation. . . ." Madam, scanning the empty classroom, was hardly attending. "So interesting. Ah, Doctor Dee!"

The doctor, following her gaze, started, stared, and then cried out, "You, and you . . . *and* you, Grizel—keep your mind on your work! Concentrate! I distinctly saw you, all three of you!"

The classroom shone in the sunlight, bright and swept and empty, but Mary thought that, just as he spoke, she had seen, faintly shimmering at three of the desks in the back row, the seated figures of girls—women?—dressed in long loose robes like dressing gowns, and each holding in her cupped hands what looked like a ball of glass. Then they were gone into the empty sunlight.

"Can you read it?" asked Doctor Dee. He pointed at the formula on the redboard with his wand. The green sparks fizzed, and the yellow words danced up and down like gnats in sunlight. "Oh dear, oh dear, I forgot to turn the power off. There, that's better, they're steady now. I know my writing is not always clear, but I hope that perhaps you can

make it out. It's one of my own spells," he added, wistfully, "and some of my pupils find it much simpler than the classical ones."

"It's very clear," said Mary, not quite truthfully, but wanting to be polite.

"Really? Really?" He looked delighted. "I know it isn't so foolproof as, say, the old Merlin formula or Professor Faust's; but one must move with the times, and some of the new fabrics proved resistant to the old formulae. Some of the acetate derivatives are the very angel to disintegrate."

"I'm wearing a lot of nylon myself," said Mary.

Rashly, as it happened. Doctor Dee beamed. "Really? Then by all means let us try immediately! Here, hold this. I haven't a spare globe, but this will do." He handed her a big glass inkwell, which had been standing on the table. It was three quarters full of ink. She hesitated, but Madam was nodding and smiling, and Doctor Dee's eyes shone with enthusiasm. Well, thought Mary, why not? She took it obediently between her hands. She could feel her palm still faintly sticky with the fly-by-night.

"Now," said Doctor Dee, "you know what to do. Read the words slowly and clearly, then watch the ink, and concentrate. You will soon see yourself going. Nylon or no nylon, I am sure that a young adept like yourself will have no difficulty whatever."

Mary lifted the inkwell, and as she did so felt on her wrist the slight tug of old Zebedee's raffia, which was still attached to Tib's neck. She noticed that Tib was sitting at the edge of the dais, staring at the empty seats behind the empty desks, and his fur was brushed up. He took no notice of Mary.

"Can he see them?" she asked.

"Cats can see everything. This is what makes them so especially valuable to us," said Doctor Dee. "And of all the familiars—toads, owls, bats—a black cat with green eyes is the one that bears away the bell." He smiled down at Tib in obvious admiration. "We do not often get a totally black cat. Splendid, splendid. Now, better give me the lead, Miss Smith. If he pulls at your hand and breaks your concentration, you will see nothing. I mean, you will see

something, and that would never do!" Laughing gently at his own joke, he took the raffia out of Mary's hand, then pointed with the wand of power at the writing on the redboard.

"Now, Miss Smith of Gormbridge, we shall see —or not see!"

7

THE BOOK OF SPELLS

In the end, she managed very well. Doctor Dee read the words with her. Afterwards she tried to remember what they were, but never could. As soon as the last one was said she bent her head and stared into the ink.

At first it was simply ink, a glossy, dark blue pool, convex at the edges as if ready to brim over. On its surface was a kind of skin where dust floated, as if the ink were not liquid at all, but solid as glass. And, just as in a glass, there was the room reflected, but very small, and perfect in detail, like a miniature painting. She could see the brilliant windows showing like tiny curved strips of light, the painted walls, the redboard, and against them her own reflection, made as small as they by the curved surface of the ink. She stared, taking it in detail by detail, the face she had studied so solemnly yesterday in the mirror at Red Manor, wishing that something would happen. . . .

It was happening now. The little figure in the ink was growing brighter, but behind it the reflected room seemed to blur, its colors running and dissolv-

ing like a film going out of focus. The picture shook, blurred, faded, then dwindled down, down, down, to be lost in the darkness at the bottom of the well shaft. For this was what the inkwell seemed now to have become. Mary found herself leaning over a deep well shaft, her hands gripping the parapet, gazing into black depths where, still, her own reflection glimmered in a swirl of smoking darkness.

Then, as softly as a candle melting, and much more quickly, the tiny image slithered into shapelessness, whirled for a moment in smoke, and vanished....

Something stung her leg, a sharp, jabbing pain which made her jump. It must have shaken her back out of the spell, for faintly now through the swirling smoke she could see the classroom windows, and faintly hear, like something echoing in a well, the wizard's bland voice saying, "Splendid! Splendid! Let's come back, shall we?"

He began to repeat a formula—not the same, but the words sounded familiar—and soon she realized that it was the original one spoken in reverse.

And, in the ink, the spell reversed. Her face reappeared against the dark, gathered shape and color as it swam closer against the sunlit background of the room, then it was only her reflection, small in a pool of ink.

She looked up, blinking in the sunlight. The headmistress was looking pleased. Here and there in the classroom a few pupils had reappeared unrebuked and were watching with interest.

Doctor Dee was smiling. "That was excellent. Remarkable for a first time, remarkable. But of course the Gormbridge background is bound to tell, eh? Next time you will be able to do it yourself, but I think we should leave it at that for the present. One shouldn't go in for long, the first spell of the term. Now I am sure Madam Mumblechook wants to show you the other classes."

He pushed Tib's lead into Mary's hand. As she went out into the dim corridor with the headmistress, Mary could hear him beginning to scold the pupils who had reappeared.

"This way," said Madam Mumblechook. "I

think you will find it interesting. It's the Science Practical, which I'm conducting myself. The teacher is unavoidably absent."

"Is she ill?"

"You might say so. She made a slight mistake with the spell. Always a tricky thing to do with the advanced classes. Complete accuracy is, of course, essential. Here we are." She opened the door. "Why, what is it, Miss Smith?"

As light from the opened door streamed into the corridor Mary had stopped, and was staring down at Tib. Or rather, at where she had imagined Tib to be. The end of the raffia was in her hand, as Doctor Dee had given it back to her, and she thought she had felt Tib gently tugging at the collar, but he was not there. Only the collar dangling. . . . No, she realized, not dangling, but floating along beside her, for all the world as if the little cat were still wearing it. But she could not see him.

"Tib!" she cried. "My cat! I know he was beside me all the time, because he scratched my leg to bring me back out of the spell. I must have left him—"

"You haven't left him." Madam Mumblechook's voice was amused and unperturbed. "He's still there. Stroke him and see."

Mary stooped and reached out, and there, indeed, was the warm fur and the strong, soft body of the cat. His head was smooth under her hand, the ears tucked back flat, and she could feel the thickness of the brushed-up fur. His whole body vibrated faintly, like something thrilling with an electric shock. He did not purr. As she picked him up, he spat.

"Where are you going?" asked Madam, rather sharply.

"Back to Doctor Dee. The spell must have worked on Tib as well, but something must have gone wrong with the antidote, at any rate for cats. He'll have to bring him back."

Madam Mumblechook laughed. "Didn't you realize, child, that anyone can come back from that state at will? You did, didn't you? And you saw what happened to the people in class when they stopped concentrating. Cats are familiar enough with magic, on the whole. Your Tib will come back when he

wants to, and not before. Can't you feel how excited he is? Put him down now, or you'll make it harder for him. You heard him spit when you picked him up. . . . That's right. Now come in, and I'll show you something really interesting. This is the class I think you should enroll in tomorrow."

The third classroom was different yet again, and of a kind familiar to Mary. It was a laboratory. There were long benches with taps and basins, and racks of flasks and test tubes, and burners lit with the familiar green flame. Some dozen or so students in black coats bent over their work. On the bench nearest the door was a complicated apparatus where a girl not much older than Mary seemed to be stewing various roots in a blue liquid which gave off a heavy, sweet smell. She was stirring the mixture with a long whitish rod shaped like a bone. At the next bench a young man, with one eye bent to a microscope, scribbled notes in a thick, yellow book. There was a cage of mice on the bench beside him. The laboratory windows were small and barred, and set high in the walls. Mary noticed how the light outside

had changed; she must have been under the invisibility spell for far longer than she had realized.

"I must see how my students are getting on," said the headmistress. "Sit down here and wait for me. I won't be long. Classes are almost over for the day."

Mary obeyed her, sitting down in the chair behind the teacher's desk. She could feel Tib close beside her leg, but when she bent to stroke him he spat again, and she drew back. She sat quietly, looking round the lab, which was so familiar and yet so strange—weird even—and found herself wishing uneasily that Madam Mumblechook would hurry up and dismiss the class, then enroll her for tomorrow, and let her go.

Madam Mumblechook went slowly from bench to bench, talking to the students, bending over their work, and sometimes sitting beside them to discuss it. Once or twice Mary had been in her father's laboratory, and had seen him doing almost the same things. But that room had been light and clean, smelling of polish and clean chemicals and

sunshine. This smelled queer, fusty, unpleasant almost, like a room which has been dark and locked too long.

Madam's voice talked softly on at the far side of the room. Liquids dripped and trickled, the mice scrabbled and squeaked in their cage. A big clock ticked, a slightly uneven sound. The lead weights were shaped like mice. The pendulum swung to and fro, to and fro, tick tock, tick tock. . . .

Hickory dickory dock
The mouse ran up the clock
The mouse was dead
As a lump of lead
And rock, rock, rock in the clock,
Rickety rock said the clock. . . .

Mary shook herself awake. Now, outside the high windows, she could see the light was fading fast. The clock said ten minutes to six. Surely the class must be over soon? Great-aunt Charlotte and Miss Marjoribanks would be home in half an hour,

and Mary ought to be there before that, or there might be questions asked which certainly she would find it difficult to answer. Mary decided to give Madam till six o'clock, then announce firmly that she must go.

On the teacher's desk in front of her was a pile of papers held down by a glass weight shaped like a frog. Light from the burners glittered on it, till it seemed to be staring at Mary with green, jeweled eyes. Idly, she glanced at the papers, then with more interest, as she saw that they were drawings of animals. She lifted the glass frog off the pile and began to examine them.

They were certainly animals, but not any animals that she had ever seen. There was one she thought at first was a squirrel, until she saw it only had two legs, and a thin tail like a rat's. Then there was a bird with no feathers, not even on its wings. Then something that might have been a hedgehog, except that it had no eyes and nose, which made it look like a sea urchin with feet.

It was like the nursery rhymes. Each one

seemed to start out right, then go suddenly, terribly wrong. Mary hated them. She pushed them back under the glass frog and looked at the clock. Five minutes to go. Madam Mumblechook was still talking, but work seemed to be finishing. One of the students was turning out the flame under a bubbling flask, and another had gone to a sink to wash out some apparatus. The young man with the microscope had put away his work. He brought the book across to the desk where Mary sat, and put it with some others on a shelf beside her. Then he went out, and some of the other students with him.

Mary glanced at the book. It was just called *Notes*, which did not seem interesting, and the thick green one beside it was called *Metastasis*, and was by somebody of the name of Dousterswivel. Mary decided not to read it. But the next looked more promising; it was bound in a soft dark red, and had a cat most beautifully embossed in gold on the spine. It looked very old. Mary pulled it out of the shelf and examined it under cover of the desk.

The cat was on the front cover as well, with the

title of the book going round it in a circle like the lettering on a coin. The title was, apparently: *Mafter Fpells.*

She opened it. The paper inside was thick and supple, almost like skin, with wavy edges. On the flyleaf was written in a large, flowing hand, which she was sure was Madam Mumblechook's: *For fenior ftudents only. Not to be taken away.*

Once, in an old book Daddy had been studying, Mary had seen *s*'s that looked like this. So *that* meant. . . . She looked at the cover again. Yes, it made sense now. The book was called *Master Spells.* She opened it.

The pages were printed in the curious old print that she had seen in Daddy's book. Here and there were diagrams, like geometry, only not the same; curious arrangements of circles and triangles, and shapes she couldn't put a name to.

Then her eye caught one of the headings: *How to Choofe Fubjects for Tranfformation.* On the page opposite was one much simpler: *To Unfaften Locks.*

And *that,* thought Mary, might be very useful,

if Tib and I are to get out of here. Even to herself she did not like to admit that now she was very uneasy indeed. And Tib was uneasy, too, she was sure. Even if he had, in a sense, brought her here —or arranged for her to come—and had seemed excited about it, why did he insist now on staying invisible?

The last of the students was packing up. Mary hesitated, then quietly slipped the red book into her pocket.

The clock checked, whirred, and struck six. Madam Mumblechook came smiling down the length of the room, her diamonds glittering green in the dusk against the light of the flames.

8

ONE FAMILIAR

"And now, my dear," said Madam Mumblechook, "classes are over for the day. If you will come to my office and put your name down, I shall give you a prospectus, and we shall expect you in the morning."

Mary got to her feet, relieved, and half ashamed of her fears. The book weighed heavy in her pocket. She put a hand down, hoping to slip it back unnoticed into its place, but Madam Mumblechook came swiftly round the desk to pause right beside the bookshelf—and it was too late.

"My books," the headmistress was saying, swooping on them with a rustle of the black robes. "If you will just give me a moment, I will lock my books away. At night they go in the strong room. None of them leaves this room. I'm sure you understand why, Miss Smith." And she took the dozen or so books from the shelf and made for a door that Mary had not noticed, right behind the teacher's chair.

"Madam Mumblechook—" began Mary guiltily.

"One moment," said Madam. "Silence, if you please."

Mary stopped. Madam Mumblechook, with the pile of books held against her chest, was facing the strong-room door and chanting something very softly under her breath. Mary could not hear the words. There seemed to be no lock or key on the door, only a bronze handle shaped like a sea horse. Madam pulled it. There was a series of clicks, smooth and oiled, and the door began to swing open. It was a huge, heavy door, made of metal, and at least nine inches thick. To Mary's surprise there was a light inside the strong room, not green this time, but a dim, ordinary yellow, like an oil lamp. Madam Mumblechook left the door standing wide, and went in with the books.

"Would you be so good, Miss Smith, as to bring the papers off my desk?" she called. "And the paperweight as well, of course. I always lock him up at night, along with the others. One can hardly be too careful, can one?" And she gave a little chuckling laugh.

It was Mary's chance. She pulled the red book from her pocket, picked up the pile of papers and put them on top of it, then carried the whole lot, with the glass frog, into the strong room. The strange thing was that Tib ran ahead of her, pulling eagerly on the raffia lead.

There was a big cupboard just inside the door, and in this Madam Mumblechook was stacking the books.

"I suppose you want this as well," began Mary. "I was just looking—" Then she stopped dead, with a gasp. She had seen what else the strong room contained.

To begin with, it was a far bigger room than she had thought. It was almost as big as the lab, and the soft light of the lamp near the door had only illumined the end of it, leaving the rest in shadow.

Mercifully in shadow. The whole of the long, dim room was lined from floor to ceiling with cages. They were barred and meshed, and stacked on one another like the shelves in a huge library, and there were bays where other ranks of cages stuck out from

the wall. Some of the cages—those nearest the door —were empty, but from those further back in the shadows peered eyes, the eyes of small creatures, silent and staring, caught by the lamplight. Here and there was a movement as a paw or a tiny foot reached through the bars, but mostly the little creatures, whatever they were, sat huddled and silent in the dark corners at the back of their prisons.

Madam Mumblechook turned at Mary's gasp. "Interesting, is it not? I thought you would be impressed. Some of our students have reached quite advanced experiments in transformation. But of course we have our failures." She laughed merrily as she pointed at the nearest cage where a forlorn-looking creature, its orange fur patched with scales like mange, lay unheeding, its back to the room. It had put two crooked paws over its eyes to shut out the light, and seemed to be sleeping. But Mary suspected that it was very wide awake. She had already recognized one of the drawings from Madam's desk.

"Marvelous," she said. Madam Mumblechook

leaned over the cage, prodding irritably at the creature, which would not move. Without pausing to think why she did so, Mary slipped the red book of master spells back into her pocket. "Here are your papers, Madam."

"Ah, thank you." Madam Mumblechook, abandoning the caged creature, thrust the papers and the glass frog into the cupboard and locked the door on them. She had not noticed the absence of the book. "I will show you round in more detail tomorrow, my dear. But now you will want to be getting home."

"Oh, yes, please!" Mary would never have thought she could be so thankful at the prospect of going back to Red Manor and Great-aunt Charlotte. "And I'd better hurry, Madam. They'll be missing me soon."

"Then we shall hurry." And the headmistress moved quickly towards the strong-room door, her black robes rustling about her. Mary followed close on her heels, pulling Tib, who for some reason seemed reluctant to go with her. Then they were out

in the lab, and behind them the strong-room door shut with a smooth *clunk*.

The lab was deserted now. The students had all gone. The burners were out.

Tib was still dragging at the lead. Mary stooped quickly, picked him up, and held him tightly. This time he neither spat nor scratched, but she heard him growl deep in his throat, and she felt him still quivering with that queer tension and excitement. She followed Madam Mumblechook out of the lab and along the corridor.

The headmistress's office was a pleasant, businesslike place. Mary stood restlessly near the door, hugging the invisible Tib, while Madam Mumblechook lifted a big ledger from a drawer and spread it open on the desk.

"Name? You still wish to go by the name of Mary Smith?"

"Yes, please."

The headmistress was inscribing the name in that bold, flowing hand that Mary recognized. "Very well. Mary Smith Sixty-four." She was writ-

ing it, Mary noticed, as LXIV. Madam underlined this carefully. "There. That is how you will be known among us. Address?"

"Red Manor, Shropshire."

Madam glanced up at that, her eyes suddenly very piercing. "Indeed?" She seemed to be about to say something further, but merely raised her brows, nodding, then turned back to the ledger. Craning forward, Mary could see what had surprised her. The previous entry looked almost exactly the same. It ran: *Mary Smith LXIII, Red Manor, Shropshire.*

Madam closed the book with a snap. "So that is that. Delighted to have you." She dropped the book back in the drawer and handed Mary an envelope. "Here is our prospectus. We will discuss fees later, but believe me, we shall be most grateful for your generous donation. So many prospective pupils have no idea that a little initial gift is not only very acceptable, but—shall we say?—an excellent start to one's college career. When you have had time to think it over, I am sure you will see it in this light."

"I don't understand," said Mary.

Madam smiled kindly. "All in due course, my dear, all in due course. Tomorrow at ten, then, and we shall discuss your classes."

"Thank you," said Mary, "And now I really think I'd better hurry home, Madam. My great-aunt likes me to be washed and changed by half past six, and—"

"Badness me," said Madam mildly, looking at the clock on the wall, "then certainly you must be going. I'm afraid that our private landing strip is locked now, except for residents, but Mr. Flanagan will have your broomstick ready at the door."

And he had. He was waiting at the foot of the front-door steps in the thick dusk, holding the little broomstick, which stood quite still in his grasp, just like an ordinary broom. So like an ordinary broom that Mary, running down the steps with relief in the fresh evening air, had a moment's terrible doubt. Had this morning's journey really been true? Had she really flown? And could she fly again?

"Will it know the way?" she asked anxiously.

Mr. Flanagan grinned cheerily. "It will that.

They're each after having their own runs, and this one will be getting you there with a lep like a blooming grasshopper. If you can stay on, that is. Come along then, me dear, I'll hold him the while you'll be mounting. Be easy now, will you?" This to the broomstick, which began to sidle and skip as Mary tried to mount it.

"Let me hold the cat," said Madam Mumblechook, and lifted Tib from Mary's arms. Tib was growling and grumbling audibly now, his voice rising to a squall as Madam Mumblechook busied herself tying the end of the raffia lead tightly to the broom handle.

"Stand back now!" cried Mr. Flanagan. "Hold on, me dears!" He gave the little broomstick a slap, and shouted, "Home wid ye now!"

It did work. It was just the same, except that this time the broomstick tried no tricks, but rushed smoothly up into the air on a trajectory like a rocket. The birch twigs whistled in the air like a tiny jet engine. Then the broomstick curved out over the huge trees at the edge of the park, and fled for the

last bright gap in the heavy clouds of evening with a speed that took Mary's breath from her lungs.

It had taken Tib's, too. As they left the ground with that tremendous leap, his squalling had checked as suddenly as if he had choked.

The clouds swirled round her, indigo and gray and amethyst, then suddenly golden, all smoke and flame and tossing fire. But this time she hardly noticed their beauty. She held on tightly to the broomstick, calling out to the silent Tib, and watching for the break in the sea of cloud that would mark the beginning of their descent.

Here it was. A great gap of darkness, like a lake of black water. The broomstick tore through the firelit surf of cloud at the ravine's edge, then plunged down into the evening dusk above Red Manor.

It skimmed the top of the lime tree, and the autumn leaves, torn off in its wake, swirled round Mary's head like a cloud of bats. There was a swish and tossing of twigs, and the broomstick jerked once as if it had hit something—or as if, thought Mary, clinging like a burr, Tib had jumped clear into the

lime boughs. Indeed, when the broomstick ran to earth in a long wake of blown leaves along the lawn, and she turned to look, the raffia lead had gone, and no warm fur met her hand as she stroked it along the twigs of the broom.

"Tib? Tib? Come down!" she called softly, dismounting and staring up into the twilit boughs of the big lime. She could see the raffia lead, caught from some high branch, swinging with the collar obviously empty. Tib had pulled himself free and, though surely not still invisible, apparently was not yet ready to come to her.

Mary ran down the path towards the kitchen garden and put the little broomstick back in its place with a pat of thanks. With a soft flirt of wings and a faint chirrup the robin flew up on the wall by the tool shed, and began to sing. There were daisies all along the edge of the path, and by the door the evening primroses shone pale and scented in the dusk. Everything was normal and ordinary, and very comforting, and there was a light in the porch to welcome her. She ran indoors.

* * *

Nobody had asked any questions that could not be answered. The old friend had apparently been good value, and Great-aunt Charlotte and Miss Marjoribanks spent a happy suppertime talking about their day. For once, Mary was pleased that they seemed totally uninterested in hers.

At last she escaped up to her room. The first thing she did was to run across to the window and pull the curtains wide. Nothing but sky and stars. The clouds had cleared, and a fresh young wind tossed the lime boughs. There was no cat waiting on the windowsill.

She pushed the sash up and leaned out, calling softly. No reply.

Mary began slowly to undress, knitting her brows with worry. Supposing Madam Mumblechook were wrong, and Tib couldn't get his visibility back at will? Suppose the spell had been different from her own? Suppose—then she remembered the book and put a hand in her pocket, half expecting the book to have vanished, too. But it was safely

there, the embossed cat and the circle of lettering winking in the electric light.

Mary fingered it doubtfully. Not tonight, perhaps. No; this was something to be looked at tomorrow, when the sun was shining. Somehow, here in her own room, the book looked uneasily out of place, not belonging to the same world as the daisies, and the smell of the lime tree, and the robin's song. But there was Tib. . . .

Well, Tib was probably all right anyway. Cats could cope with magic, they had told her. And in any case, Tib would have to be here himself for any kind of spell to work.

She put the book on her dressing table, and then noticed, sticking out from between the pages where she must have pushed it, the envelope Madam Mumblechook had given her with the College's prospectus. She picked it up. This was different; since she had no intention of ever going there again, it would be fun to have the prospectus to keep and read. Now that she was safely back at home, the adventure was pleasant enough to remember. Apart

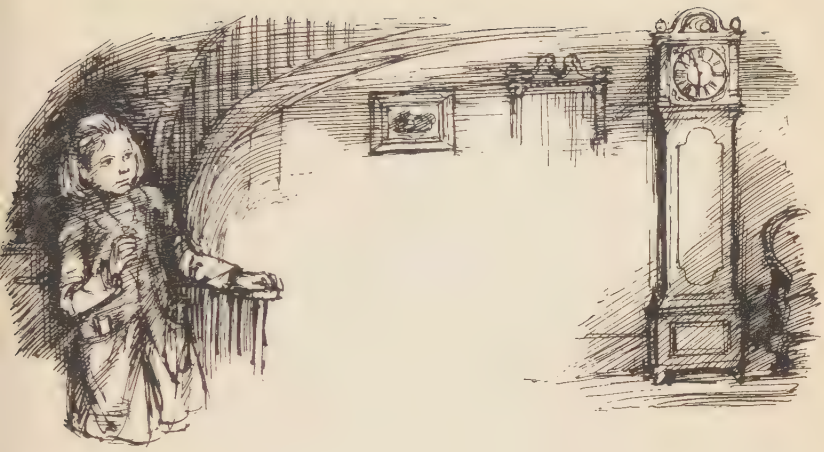
from Tib's accident everything had gone well, and they thought she was a wizard's daughter. . . .

Mary grinned to herself at the thought of Daddy making himself invisible. She would enjoy showing him the prospectus, and Mother, too. How people would stare when they knew that there was a College for Witches, only a broomstick's ride away from Red Manor. She wondered if there was a picture, or even a map to show you how to get there. She opened the envelope.

A slip of paper fell out.

On it was written, in that big bold hand: "Received with thanks of Miss Mary Smith LXIV of Red Manor in Shropshire, one Familiar for Transformation Experiments."

And an initial below which looked like M.



9

TO UNFAFTEN LOCKS

There was nothing for it. She would have to go back, and tonight. They would hardly keep Tib unharmed until tomorrow, when they expected Mary back as a pupil, otherwise the headmistress would not have been so mysterious about the "donation" Mary had made, and she would have taken the little cat more openly, instead of. . . . Yes, thought Mary, as she hurried her clothes on again, that was how they had done it. When Madam Mumblechook took the cat from her she had simply pretended to put him on the broomstick, then she had tied the empty raffia to the handle, and Mr. Flanagan had sent the broomstick away before Mary had had time to check on Tib's presence. They were all in it, nice though they had seemed. And Doctor Dee, too. Mary was sure now that he had deliberately left Tib invisible, to help Madam and Mr. Flanagan snatch him. Cats were "especially valuable," Doctor Dee had said. But if cats knew about magic, then Tib must have known what he was risking. Why, then, had he deliberately led her to Endor College?

Mary stood in the middle of her bedroom, fully dressed again, thinking. It was quite dark outside, and the wind had grown stronger, and was roaring in the treetops. There were voices on the stairs now; Great-aunt Charlotte coming to bed early, as usual. Miss Marjoribanks would be anything up to an hour later. It would be useless for Mary to attempt before that to creep downstairs unseen. She would have to wait.

She sat down in the chair by the lamp and opened the red book called *Mafter Fpells.* Three spells, if they were there, she had to find. She found the index page and ran her finger down.

The first one she had seen before: *To Unfaften Locks.* The others would probably be more difficult, but surely there must be one to cancel invisibility, and one to undo a transformation?

But there was not. She read the list again, slowly. "To Change into Ftone. To Turn Him Blue. To Ftrike Him Pink. To Render His Hands Powerlefs. To Tranfform into Animals. To Tranfform One Animal into Another. . . ."

Mary's finger checked; then she saw what followed: "This Fpell does not apply to cats, toads, or other familiar creatures of witches."

So it would not work. Cats were special. Perhaps these people never did undo transformations, just went on and on experimenting, changing one miserable shape into another. . . .

It didn't bear thinking about. She went down the index again. Nothing, nothing . . . *ah!* She had it! At the foot of the page, printed small, was a star, and after it the simple words: *The Mafter Fpell.*

Mary turned to the back of the book.

There it was, printed in scarlet, with a star at the start of every line. Above it, under the heading *The Mafter Fpell,* was written in a small, crabbed hand: "To Undo Any Magick Within Range. This fpell to be ufed only againft Magick already made. If it is ufed where there has been no Magick, then it will come back upon the ufer, to his dire affliction. Beware, and fay me not fave in fore need."

Mary read no further. Footsteps were coming creaking up the stairs. She switched the light off and

waited, breathless in the dark, listening. She heard Miss Marjoribanks' door open and shut, softly. A few minutes later the grandfather clock in the hall struck eleven. The house settled, creak by creak, into silence.

At last she moved. She switched the light on and got into her dark coat and soft-soled shoes. She dropped a flashlight into one pocket and the book of spells into the other. The purple fly-by-night was in a glass on the windowsill. She picked a head off it, keeping it carefully in her hand.

Then, heart thumping, she opened her bedroom door.

It was quite quiet. The only sound was the steady ticking of the grandfather clock. The lights were out under Great-aunt Charlotte's door and Miss Marjoribanks'. Mary switched on her flashlight and crept along the corridor to the stair head, then slowly, slowly, down the stairs, avoiding the treacherous one three from the bottom, which creaked.

As she reached the hall the grandfather clock cleared its throat and struck the half hour.

Mary jumped. Then the steady, soft ticking started again. Hickory dickory dock. . . .

The memory came to her of that other clock, the one in the lab at Endor College, with the lead weights that looked like horrid little dead mice, and the nasty rhyme it seemed to click out. She shone her flashlight up at the grandfather clock. Its brass face winked at her cheerfully. The weights were hidden in the clock case, but Mary knew what they looked like: fir cones, fat and tightly shut. It was a lovely, old, homely clock, and it is possible that at that moment Mary would have gone straight upstairs again and tried to forget all about the other one, if a movement at the foot of the clock had not caught her eye. A mouse, a real one, small and glossy and bright-eyed, whisking aside out of the beam of the flashlight and vanishing into the wainscot.

"Wait till Tib sees you," whispered Mary, and then said to herself, in surprise, "and *that's* fair enough; it's the way things are; it's between Tib and the mouse. But magic isn't fair. Not on Tib *or* the mice—and not on those poor things in the cages,

whatever they are. I'll have to go. And it wouldn't be right to use the spell book to unlock our front door, either. I'll do it the way it's used to, even if it does take longer."

It didn't take so very long. A few moments later the last bolt slid back and the key turned to let Mary out into the dark night air.

It was so easy that it was almost routine. The little broomstick was just where she had left it, and apparently it was asleep, because when Mary took hold of it, it gave a jump and a kick that nearly tore it out of her grasp. But now she knew what to do. She squeezed the fly-by-night in her hand, rubbed the hand down the broom handle, and said sharply, "Stand still!"

The little broomstick stood still.

"That's better!" said Mary sternly. She settled flashlight and book carefully in her pockets, got astride the broomstick, stroked it—this time more gently—with the crushed flower, and commanded it, "Endor College. Front door, and carefully, please!"

The broomstick, with only the tiniest quiver of a buck, leaped into the air and headed straight for the nearest bunch of stars.

It was impossible to tell distance this time, or height. The sensation of speed was, if anything, greater than during daylight, because all the stars seemed to be racing and wheeling as well. It was like flying through an enormous Catherine wheel of a sky, where stars whirled and flashed, and the wake of the little broomstick fizzed with bubbles of light. Then the stars, pouring away, dwindled to bright dust, and the dusky trees sailed up and blotted them out, and the broomstick had arrived.

Just as it had been told. At the very foot of the front-door steps.

Mary dismounted. The broomstick stood quite still for her, so as she propped it in the shadow of the house wall she gave it a friendly little pat and whispered, "Wait for me, and be good. I won't be long."

She stood for a moment in the shadow beside it, watching and listening. There were no lights in the windows. The alarm cock was silent. Indeed, not

many sounds would be audible above the rush of wind in the treetops. This had got stronger now, almost as if a storm were coming. Mary, flattening herself back into the deep shadow between the steps and the house wall, got out her book and her flashlight, and shone a cautious light on the page.

To Unfaften Locks. . . .

It was right, she supposed, to use the spell on the front door of Endor College. It seemed such a simple little rhyme, but if the lock was indeed a magic one. . . .

It was, and the spell worked. The door opened in smooth, obedient silence, and Mary, her heart thumping, stole into the hall. She shut the door quietly behind her and stood still, listening.

No lights; no sound. With stealthy flashes of her light she tiptoed down the long corridor towards the door of the lab.

This was shut, but not locked. She eased it open, and was back in the horrid room she remembered. The clock was ticking; offbeat it went, with its nasty little rhyme. Mary ignored it. She shut the

door carefully and tiptoed past the teacher's desk to the massive, locked door of the strong room.

The book was still open at the lock spell. She put her hand, still faintly sticky with the fly-by-night, on the bronze sea horse that did duty for a handle, and whispered the spell.

The huge door came smoothly open, and stood wide for her to enter.

Inside, the lamp still burned with its yellow light. Further back, in the dusk, the bars of the cages glimmered, and behind the bars, the eyes. All wide awake, all staring.

"Tib?" whispered Mary. "Tib? Are you there?"

No answer. Only a rustling and a faint muttering, gobbling sound as all the queer misshapen creatures came crowding to the fronts of their cages. Those that had eyes had them fixed on her, beseeching. Small paws scrabbled at the bars.

"Tib?" Surely, if Tib were here, he would make some sign. She began to run along the rows of cages, peering inside them in the faint light, calling, "Tib? Tib? Tib?" in a desperate little whisper.

A squirrel shot a paw out and snatched at her sleeve, and she paused. "Tib? Is that you?"

From the next cage a hedgehog's foot reached, urgently, and from the cage above a twisted claw stretched out to pat her hair.

Mary had not thought of this. She backed away from the wall of cages and took out her flashlight again, sending its beam along the packed rows. "Tib? Tib? If you're here, make a sound! Try, Tib! Try to mew! Surely you've still got a voice?"

But they all understood her. And they were all desperate. From every cage came small, frantic noises, as the rabbits, rats, squirrels, pangolins, hedgehogs, frogs and lizards tried, from all their differently shaped throats, to mew.

"Please, please!" Mary, her hands to her ears, was almost crying "Can't you *understand?* I can't open all those locks; it would take hours and hours! And even if I could, how could you get away? You're all so little, and you've none of you got proper legs or wings! Please, *please* be quiet and let me find Tib!"

But they took no notice. The eyes besought

her, the paws reached frantically through the bars, the little throats croaked and mewed and gobbled and cried.

Then suddenly, silence.

Then Mary, too, heard what they had heard. Footsteps were coming down the corridor towards the laboratory door.

10

THE MASTER SPELL

There were two sets of footsteps, and one of them belonged to Madam Mumblechook. Mary heard her talking, then a man's voice answering her.

She ran to the door of the strong room and stood there, listening. Perhaps they were not coming here; perhaps the voices would go straight past the laboratory door. . . .

They stopped just outside it.

"A most successful experiment, Doctor Dee," Madam was saying. "And well worth staying late for. I believe we may congratulate ourselves."

The doorknob turned.

Mary whisked back into the strong room and pulled the massive door shut behind her. It closed quietly, with a faint gasp of air. She could hear nothing now. All round her the creatures were silent, save for the faint scratching of their feet on the floor of the cages, and their soft, hurried breathing. The air was dead; Mary heard her own heart beating as if it were footsteps.

They had spoken of an experiment. Perhaps

they just wanted something from the lab. Perhaps they would not come in here. . . .

She heard the lock of the strong-room door turn over with a smooth click.

When Madam Mumblechook and Doctor Dee came into the strong room, Mary was at the far end of it, crouched on the floor in the darkness behind the last bay of cages.

". . . in here," Madam was saying, "and that will do for tonight, I think? We can perhaps continue tomorrow?"

"Certainly," said Doctor Dee. "I admit to finding it a challenge, a real challenge. A more difficult subject even than the gray, wouldn't you agree?"

"Indeed. But how satisfactory to be able to check those results with this one, and so soon." There was a sound of something being laid down. "There. Quite a difference, isn't there? I don't think he'll be readily recognized now, even if she decides to be difficult about it."

"All cats are gray in the dark, don't they say?"

said Doctor Dee, and laughed. "Ah, it's awake now. All is well. There was a moment, I admit to you, dear ma'am, when I thought I might have made the mixture too strong. However, I suggest we leave the creature in the lab cage overnight, until—ah, naughty!"

Something had hissed, but not like a cat; like a snake, thought Mary. Madam Mumblechook laughed, and Doctor Dee said complacently, "He'll learn. And now, dear Madam, I had better be on my way."

They were going. Mary held her breath. She had the impression that all the creatures in the cages held theirs. The great door whooshed shut on its cushion of air. Silence settled. She tiptoed out into the lamplight to see what Madam had brought.

In a small—a very small—cage made of bright, common-looking metal, a cage no bigger than a large mousetrap, sat a frog. It had a hunched back, protruding eyes, and a spotted skin. It was sitting up on its enormous haunches, and its forelegs were too short. They were just little curled claws, held tightly

in to its chest. When it saw Mary, it hitched and shuffled itself forward on its haunches towards the bars, and tried to reach her with the tiny, useless paws.

"An experiment," they had said. "A difficult subject. He'll learn," they had said, and laughed.

Mary put a finger through the bars, and the little paws fastened round it. She saw how the lamplight ran over the freckled skin like silk; how the powerful frog muscles bunched and glimmered; how the bulbous eyes shone.

"Tib?" she whispered. "My pretty Tib. I know it's you. You'd be beautiful, whatever they did to you. And I think I'm beginning to understand; the 'gray' they talked about, that was your brother Gib, wasn't it? He must be here too, somewhere. If I get you out, you can show me which he is, and we'll take him, too. Keep still now, and let go my finger. I've got to find the Master Spell."

For of course the lock spell by itself would be useless. She must undo the transformation as well. She opened the book at the Master Spell.

The red lines, with their warning stars, seemed to quiver in the lamplight. ". . . it will come back upon the ufer, to his dire affliction. Beware, and fay me not fave in fore need."

Well, this was sore need, and if it came back upon her, that was just too bad. It was already more than bad for Tib and his brother, and for these countless other creatures whom she wished so desperately that she could help as well.

She took a breath. The massive door was tightly shut. There was no need to whisper. She raised her voice to its normal pitch, and spoke quickly and clearly. . . .

There were six lines of it, and it is not possible to quote it here, because never after this night was Mary able to remember a word of it. But it was a simple, gay little rhyme, and it ended on a phrase that might have been (but wasn't) "the dancing ring of days."

". . . ring of days," finished Mary, strongly.

That did it.

Everything happened at once.

With a clicking and a cracking like a million billion nuts popping under the feet of a hundred elephants, the locks of the cages—all the cages—flew open. The cupboard door fell off its hinges, and the glass frog rolled out as the books and papers on the shelves wisped away to charred ash. The strong-room door itself swung wide and stood. And out of every cage the creatures jumped, flapped, crept, shuffled, clawed their way, till they swarmed all round Mary's feet on the ground. Then, suddenly, the dim lamp swelled and flashed and sparkled, and the dead air of the strong room went whirling and whistling through the bars of the empty cages, and with it—instead of the grunting breaths and shuffling claws of the unhappy, stunted creatures on the floor—came the sound of wings and dancing hoofs. Under Mary's eyes a lame hedgehog stretched and grew and became a young deer, dappled and big-eyed, and supple as willow; a shuffling pangolin swept into the air with the knife wings and scarlet throat of a swallow; the glass frog, rolling to her feet, melted into the steely velvet of a beautiful smoke-

gray cat; then all round her were wings and the joyous cries of birds, and the light-flecked coats and tossing antlers of deer.

And from the little metal cage with its burst lock leaped Tib, eyes wide and brilliant, and landed on Mary's left shoulder, as the gray cat swarmed up her other arm to anchor every claw in the collar of her coat.

For a few shocked and deafened seconds Mary could not move. The sudden flashing magic, the appalling noise, seemed to split the night. Then she shouted, "Run, everyone! This way!" and tore out through the strong-room door and across the lab.

Here, too, was chaos. Tubes and retorts burst with cracks and flashes, and liquid ran down red, green and purple, so that the deer's hoofs splashed the colored spray shoulder-high as they galloped through. The clock weights dropped to the floor, became mice, and vanished down the nearest crevice, closely followed by the mice from the burst cage on the bench. The clock springs, released screaming, whipped up in great coils, whirled round and round

three times, then smashed in a whirring tangle of metal.

"Hic," said the clock, and stopped.

The lab door stood wide. Mary, the book in her hand and the cats on her shoulders, dived through it and, with the air alive with birds and with a score of deer racing beside her, ran down the long corridor to the front door.

It was open, too.

But so was the door of Madam's office. And in that doorway, side by side, Madam Mumblechook and Doctor Dee stood transfixed and furious.

Together they leaped into action. Doctor Dee whirled his wand of power up, yelling, "Stop! I bid you stop!" and Madam Mumblechook ran to slam the front door.

But nobody stopped, or even paused. Doctor Dee was waving his wand and shouting still, but his voice could not be heard for the noise of wings and hoofs and the excited calling of the animals and birds. Tib, on Mary's left shoulder, was yelling like a demon, and on her right the gray cat answered. The

noise was dreadful. And whether it simply drowned the wizard's voice, or whether the Master Spell still held, Madam and the doctor were powerless. The front door sprang open against the witch's hands, so violently that she was flung back against the wall; and then the herd of deer, with Mary in their midst and the flock of birds sweeping overhead, ran clean over the wizard, knocking him, wand and all, flat to the floor. Then they were all racing anyhow down the wide steps and out in the fresh, free night.

The deer fled on, over the grassland, under the trees' shadow. Mary saw them reach the wall, and over it in the windy starlight they went like a lifting wave. The birds shot high into the starlit air, screaming with joy. Mary stumbled down the last step, the cats clinging like goose grass, and ran for the dark corner where she had left her little broomstick.

It must have come to meet her. She almost fell over it, half propped against the stone griffin at the foot of the steps.

She jumped astride it, clapped it with her hand, and shouted, "Home! Straight home!"

It leaped into the air. As she soared over the trees, gaining height, she saw below her the last wave of deer bound over the park wall and scud away into the dark woods. All around the treetops were filled with birds, singing as if it were midday. Then woodland, birdsong, and the scent of the trees dropped away from her, and there was nothing but the flying starlight and the ecstatic shrilling of the two cats at her ears.

It seemed a much quicker ride than usual. The broomstick slowed, swooped down through a swirl of windy cloud, then coasted to a smooth landing on grass.

Mary dismounted stiffly. The cats leaped down off her shoulders, but, to her surprise, stayed close beside her feet. Even in the fitful light of the cloud-mantled stars she could see the arch of their backs and the stiffness of their tails. They seemed to be staring at the house.

Mary turned to see what was scaring them so. Then she, too, stiffened and stood staring. And she knew that if she, like the cats, had had a tail, it would

have been sticking straight up like theirs, and fluffy as a bottle brush.

It was the wrong house.

She picked up the broomstick. Yes, it was the wrong broomstick, too. Her own little broomstick had, after all, stayed exactly where she had bidden it. And there had only been one other visitor to Endor College that night—Doctor Dee.

Mary stood there on Doctor Dee's front lawn, holding Doctor Dee's broomstick, and staring at the front of Doctor Dee's house with horror.

The cats spat, sprang away, and vanished into the shadows.

Someone jumped out of the bushes behind her. A voice said, gruffly and threateningly, "So it was you, you rotten witch! Now I've got you, and you'd better do as I say!"

11

FLY-BY-NIGHT

It was a boy; a boy of about Mary's own age, perhaps a little older, but taller and tough-looking. His hair looked quite dark in the starlight, and he was scowling ferociously. He was also brandishing a thick stick with a nasty-looking knob on the end.

Then he stopped, peered, and said on a note of uncertain surprise, "I know you, don't I? Who are you?"

Mary had backed a step in front of the threatening cudgel. "I've never seen you before in my life. I'm Mary Smith, from Red Manor. Are you Doctor Dee's apprentice?"

"Doctor who's what? Of course I'm not!" He sounded surprised and indignant, but he let the cudgel fall. "I'm the vicar's son, Peter." He took in his breath. "Yes, that's it! I've seen you in a photo up at the Manor. That's why I thought I knew you. Daddy said you were staying with your great-aunt."

"They told me you were away on holiday," said Mary.

"We got back today. But look, what is all this? Who's this Doctor Dee?"

"Don't you know? This is his house—at least, I think it must be." He was scowling at her still, but uncertainly, and this gave Mary confidence. She added, "What are *you* doing here, anyway?"

"I came to look for my cat," said Peter.

"So it *is* yours!" cried Mary. "The gray one?"

He nodded. "When we got back, Mr. Spenser said Gib had disappeared a week ago. We've looked everywhere, all day. Then I found a note under one of the plant pots in the potting shed. It said—"

"I know what it said. It was a receipt for 'one Familiar for Transformation Experiments,' " said Mary.

The boy stiffened, and the cudgel moved again as his grip tightened. "Then you *are* a witch? I promise you, if you don't give me my cat back—"

"Please," said Mary, backing again, "I'm not a witch, honestly! I just got mixed up in it because *my* cat disappeared as well, and as a matter of fact I've found them both, and transformed them back again."

"Do you expect me to believe that?" demanded Peter. "Where are they, then?"

"There," said Mary, with relief, as the two cats, their fur once more sleek and shining, strolled out of the shadows on to the grass.

"Gib!" said Peter. The cudgel thudded down on the grass, and he snatched the cat up, hugging him. "Where did you find him?"

"Look," said Mary earnestly, "there isn't time to tell you. You'll just have to believe me, and I think we'd better be getting out of here now, this minute."

But the boy didn't move. "That's the whole point," he said. "We can't get out. The walls are smooth as glass and there aren't any trees, and the gate's locked."

Mary looked round her. He was right. Doctor Dee's house stood in a square garden which was surrounded by a very high wall. There was not a tree, not a creeper, nothing by which the walls could be climbed. And even in the starlight she could see the enormous padlock on the gate. "But how did you get in, then?"

"Walked in," said Peter bitterly. "I thought I

heard Gib mewing inside the walls, so of course I came straight in. And the gate shut behind me, smooth as butter, and I've been here for hours. Mother and Daddy will be out of their minds. It must be midnight."

"Probably after," said Mary, for whom the night had certainly seemed a long one. "Well, we'll have to fly out the way I came in. Hold tight to Gib, will you?" She felt for the remains of the fly-by-night in her pocket, and squeezed the last of its juices over her hand. "Hurry up now, hold tight. These broomsticks are funny; they sometimes buck."

But it didn't buck. When Mary rubbed it with the fly-by-night, with a sharp command to "get over the wall," the broomstick tried its best, rearing from the ground; but with the double weight on it, it could not rise even as far as the top of the wall. At about six feet up, it stuck, and then careered round and round the walled garden till the two children were dizzy, and Mary gasped at last, "Go down, will you? *Go down!*"

With a little wriggle of relief, the broomstick

dropped. The two children got off. There was no need to hold on to the cats now; Tib and Gib seemed to realize exactly what the situation was, and were silent, each cat clinging tightly to a child's shoulder with every one of his eighteen claws.

"What on earth are we going to do?" asked Peter in dismay. Then suddenly he lifted his head. "Listen! What's that?"

Above the soughing of the wind in the treetops outside came another sound; a high, swishing noise that Mary, with a prickling of the spine, recognized.

"It's a broomstick coming. Doctor Dee. Quickly, we'll have to hide!"

She ran for the house door, snatching the book out of her pocket. The flashlight found the right page, and fixed on the lock spell.

"He'll think we've gone inside. Then we can take his broomstick." She muttered the lock spell straight to the house door and watched it open immediately. Then she ran across the grass, snatched up the broomstick, and crouched down with Tib among the bushes beside Peter.

Not a moment too soon. Low overhead came that long, swishing noise, like paper tearing, and a broomstick bearing a black crouching figure shot over the top of the garden wall and landed on the grass with a thud.

Doctor Dee was furiously angry. The screech he gave when he saw the open door made Mary shrink back into the bushes, and she felt Peter shiver beside her. There was a soft hiss from the gray cat, but it did not move. Tib made no sound. Doctor Dee jumped off his broomstick, flung it to one side, and rushed in through the open door of the house, his white wand of power brandished above his head.

He was searching the house. From window after window, as he searched, they saw the flickering green light from his wand.

The children watched it. It appeared, suddenly, at an upstairs window. Then it faded.

Peter said softly, "He's at the back of the house now. Come on."

They ran out on to the lawn, and Mary picked up the broomstick the doctor had flung aside. She

could feel it quivering with apprehension—or could it be rage?

"It's my own little broomstick!" she whispered, excited and relieved. "And it knows the way home! Here, you take Doctor Dee's. If it will only follow mine—"

But it would not. As Peter took it, it gave a jump and a buck, and tore itself free from his hands. It vanished after its master into the dark doorway of the house.

Mary was already running for the gate. She had, in her haste, let go the little broomstick, but it came cantering alongside her. She did not even need the flashlight and the book for the lock spell. She whipped the squashed fragment of fly-by-night from the pocket of her coat and, pressing it hard against the padlock, whispered the spell as quickly as she could gabble the words.

The padlock snapped with a flash of green fire, and fell to the ground. The door opened on screaming hinges that sounded like a screech of rage. They heard its echo, in Doctor Dee's voice, from the

house behind them. Then they tumbled through the open gate into the starlight of a narrow, winding lane.

"Get on!" cried Mary, and in a moment Peter was behind her on the broomstick, the gray cat clamped to his shoulder and hissing with excitement like a steam kettle. Tib was still silent, but every now and again his tail whipped from side to side, as if he could not stop it. "Hang on, everyone!" she shouted. "Now, dear little broomstick, please take us all home to Red Manor!"

And she rubbed her fly-by-night hand down the shaft of the broom.

They could feel that it was an effort, but the little broomstick tried very gallantly. It heaved itself into the air under the double weight of children and cats, and surged up three feet, four feet, five. . . .

At about eight feet it leveled off, and began to race. Now and again the branches of trees loomed up in the dark and whipped at them. They lay as low as they could, holding on tightly.

It seemed this was as high as they could get, and

at this height the sensation of speed was infinitely greater than it had been through the limitless air. Both children were soon breathless, and Mary heard Tib begin to swear to himself as he clung, rocking, to her shoulder. The lane was full of curves, and the broomstick went swooping round them, banking to right and left like a swallow flying. It was terrifying, exhilarating, and very uncomfortable. But they were on the way home.

Then they heard the other broomstick coming. It was high overhead, with Doctor Dee, still shouting angrily, astride it. Suddenly his voice changed to a shout of greeting as another long, tearing swish announced the arrival of a new broomstick, and Madam Mumblechook's voice, high-pitched and furious, cried, "Have you caught her?"

At the same moment the little broomstick dropped smoothly downward until it was running along in the lane's shadow. It was very dark here, and the broomstick's pace, mercifully, slowed. They were free now of the whipping branches, but still the curves and dips of the lane, which the little broom-

stick seemed to sense as accurately as a night-flying bat, continually took them by surprise, so that they lurched and swayed more violently than ever. It was like riding an uncontrollable horse at full gallop in the dark along a path one doesn't know.

Then all at once the lane came to an end, and the little broomstick shot out of the comforting shadow of the hedgerows, across a smooth open meadow where, sharp below them on the starlit grass, scudded their flying shadow.

12

RIDE AWAY, RIDE AWAY

Too late to go back. Too late even to make for the shadow of one of the huge oaks dotted here and there in the meadow. They had been seen. From high above came screams of anger and discovery.

"There she goes!" shrieked Madam Mumblechook. "Two of them! They can't go any higher! We've got them both! You take the port; I'll take the starboard! Now—*attack!*"

The two broomsticks, high in the night air, wheeled away from one another, then tilted, turned, and dived. Their speed was tremendous. They tore downward on a steadily rising scream of air, one from each side, deadly as hawks plummeting on their prey.

Mary felt the little broomstick give a sudden leap of effort and thought, without hope, that it was trying its best to accelerate. But no. It dropped another two feet, so that the children's toes were brushing the dew from the long, seeding grasses. Harebells shook with a sweet, whispering rattle. A thistle exploded softly against Mary's foot, its cloud

of seeds scattering like ghosts through the dim grass.

She gripped the broomstick more tightly. "Oh, Peter, it's going to land and let them—"

"No," said Peter urgently, in her ear. "Leave it alone. It knows what it's about. Don't you see? They can't pounce on us when we're flying as low as this. Coming down from that height they'd run straight into the ground."

His voice was lost in the whining scream as Doctor Dee swept down on them. The little broomstick had held steadily to its course, sailing forward straight and level, but in the exact moment that the Doctor swooped, it jinked sideways, so that the clinging children lurched with it, and their right feet struck the ground. Briefly their steed checked, but recovered immediately and leaped away. The attacking broomstick overshot them at great speed. For a moment it looked as if the doctor would hit the ground, but at the last instant he recovered, and his broomstick tore on, away, rearing upward fast to regain height.

"I told you our broomstick knew what it was doing," said Peter with satisfaction. "Look, I think it's saved us!"

On the words the little broomstick, rising slightly in a flowing leap, crossed a fence and a wide ditch that smelled of meadowsweet, and ran with them into the shadow of a deep, dark wood.

"This must lead us home in the end," said Mary, "but it'll take an awfully long time. It seemed ages, even flying. How did you get to Doctor Dee's without a broomstick, Peter?"

"I had my bike for part of the way. Somebody told me they thought they'd seen Gib down in the garden of an empty house near the river. Well, I went that way, but there was thick mist at the river bridge, so I left my bike there, and walked. It was easier. I thought I heard Gib, you see, calling in the mist. I suppose that may have been magic. Anyway, I lost my way in the mist and couldn't get back, and then I found Doctor Dee's house."

"How far from the bridge?" asked Mary.

"I don't know. I seemed to be walking for ages, but—hallo, I can see the end of the wood. That's a pity; I hoped it would take us the whole way. If they're waiting for us at the other side—"

Unmistakably, just above the crests of the woodland trees, they could hear Madam Mumblechook and the doctor talking. The two of them must be flying a short way apart; their voices were raised, and quite distinct.

". . . in the wood. We have only to wait up here, cruising," said Doctor Dee clearly, "to see which way they break cover. Then we have them."

"Has it occurred to you, doctor"—Madam sounded agitated—"has it occurred to you that the girl must have the Master Spell? How else could she have undone all those expert transformations and destroyed our laboratory, all in a moment?"

"You are forgetting, dear Madam. The Master Spell only works till daylight." Doctor Dee gave a chuckle. "All we have to do is to keep them contained in this wood till daylight, then run them down at leisure."

The children did not speak. It was too bad. All they could do was to rely on the little broomstick. But it seemed as if the little broomstick had understood. Suddenly, a few yards short of the starlit gap that showed the end of the wood, it stopped and sank back on its twigs. Peter got off without a word, and walked forward to the fence.

Then he came back. "It's another open field, a big one, sloping down to what looks like a stream. A few trees there, but not enough—not thick cover like this. And beyond that it looks like open moor."

"What are we going to do?"

Peter patted the little broomstick, absently. "Don't sound so worried! We'll think of something."

"Let's give the little broomstick a rest, first," said Mary, "and maybe groom it a bit. It seems to like that." And she dismounted and stood stroking it with her fly-by-night hand.

It certainly seemed to like that. It rubbed itself against her, purring. . . .

No, of course it wasn't purring. Mary turned

her head sharply. It was Tib, beside her ear, who had suddenly purred. His head was up and his ears cocked towards where, deep in the wood, someone —something—was approaching them.

13

THE WILD DEER COME GALLOPING

"Someone's coming," said Peter sharply. "Get on quick. It sounds as if one of them's beating the wood to flush us out, while the other is—"

"No," said Mary. "Tib's purring. And look, the little broomstick hasn't moved. Keep still and listen."

They waited, quite still, their eyes on the darkness of the deep wood. The rustling grew louder. It was not one person, but a crowd of people or creatures approaching softly through the thick undergrowth. Ferns swished and the dew shook down. All the scents of the wood came floating, larch and bramble flowers and late honeysuckle, and the dark smoky scent of ivy. Then the bushes parted, and into the dim starlight, the dew shining on antlers and burnished coat, stepped a big, beautiful stag. After him, delicately, trooped a score of dappled deer.

Tib gave a queer, gobbling cry, deep in his throat, the cry Mary had last heard in the dreadful strong room. On Peter's shoulder, the gray cat mewed softly, and began to purr.

"It's the deer that were enchanted!" said Mary excitedly. "I freed them with the Master Spell. Perhaps they've come to help us!"

The stag paced forward, stretching his splendid head towards her. He snuffed twice, at her, at Tib on her shoulder, then turned to look at Peter, ears pricked.

"Peter's my friend," said Mary quickly. "He came to rescue Gib."

The great stag reached forward to snuff at Peter's chest, then he wheeled, trotted forward to the fence that edged the wood and stood there, his magnificent head high, looking back at them over his shoulder.

"I remember him," said Mary. "He was that poor creature covered with mangy fur. Madam laughed at him and prodded him. I'm sure he's come to help us. But how? What can he do?"

"He wants us to go that way," said Peter. "Come along."

But Mary hung back. "I don't see how we can. Listen, you can still hear Madam and Doctor Dee overhead."

The other deer were all around them now, crowding close. Peter laughed, pointing to the tossing heads and bright liquid eyes. "It's a convoy." He sounded quite cheerful and confident. "Don't you see? If we break out of the wood in the middle of that lot, Madam and the doctor can't get at us—even if they see us. And they might miss us completely among all the running shadows. Come along. It's our best chance."

"Do you really think—" began Mary doubtfully, but was stopped by the little broomstick. It could hardly be said to be tossing its head and pawing the ground, but the effect was the same. It pranced in her hands, obviously excited, and willing them to go. "All right!" she said, and jumped on. "Hang on then, Tib! Quick, Peter, or the little broomstick'll be away with me!"

Peter climbed astride the broomstick and held on. The cats clung tightly, both purring now like racing engines. Round them the deer leaped and frolicked, their delicate hoofs hardly printing the ground, and with them the little broomstick skipped, frisking. The great stag threw his head up,

snuffed the air, then, from a standstill, bounded over the fence and trotted out into the starlight. After him streamed the deer, and among them, a shadow among their leaping shadows, ran the little broomstick.

Smoothly over the fence, over the ditch, out into the open field—then all at once they were galloping, the deer traveling in long, fluid leaps all around them. Antlers tossed, eyes shone wide and dark in the starlight, white tails scudded ahead, dainty hoofs pattered on turf like rain. The dew-laden coats brushed the children's legs, and under them the grassy meadow flashed by as, effortless, the herd raced as silently as their own shadows down the long slope towards the stream. A hedge showed, briefly, and was gone under them as if it had been no more than a stand of thistles. The stream, shining and noisy, flashed under them and fled back into silence. A stone wall loomed, and the little broomstick, gathering itself, flung itself and its load up and over as the deer soared and sank like a great wave breaking, and the race went on.

Then suddenly the birds were with them, too. A peewit tumbled screaming out of the dark; then a flight of swallows, with a high shrilling noise, then blackbirds, thrushes, pigeons, sparrows—all the birds fresh from those dreadful cages; birds who should have been asleep, head under wing, but who flew now with the herd of deer to hide the escaping children from the danger above them.

For the danger was there. For the first few minutes, it seemed, Madam and the doctor had assumed that the stream of shadows breaking at a gallop from the wood was only a wild herd of deer; but they must have decided to make sure, for now one broomstick turned quickly in pursuit. The other still circled sentinel above the trap of trees.

It was Doctor Dee who was coming. There was the dreadful, familiar swish of his broomstick overhead. Then the sudden fierce swoop, which scattered the birds in all directions, and the yell of anger and triumph, "Madam! Madam! Here! This way!"

Then with the white wand brandished in his hand like a whip, Doctor Dee was swooping down

among the birds, scattering them to right and left as he tried to reach the children in the middle of the racing herd.

But the herd defeated him. Each time the wand whipped down it struck some tossing antler, and the green sparks flew and flashed, but still the deer fled on unharmed. They were not afraid; he could not enchant them again; they only bunched more closely round the children, and raced on. The wizard whipped at them with the powerless wand, and the green fire ran along their coats like water. Mary saw that the animals nearest to them were the stags, all armed with antlers. Once, when the wand flashed down near her head, a pair of antlers caught and parried it with a crack and blaze like lightning, and the wizard gave a cry as if he had had a shock. After that he withdrew to a height of perhaps twenty feet, and once again the birds closed in.

This time they attacked. They were all too small to damage Doctor Dee himself—the biggest were the pigeons—but it is not easy to fly straight through a flock of wheeling, darting, furious birds,

which think nothing of flying straight into one's face, or hitting out with passing claws at one's head, or simply blinding one by flying round and round in flocks at the level of one's eyes. The doctor's broomstick didn't like them either. It swerved and bucked and tried to jib, while the doctor, hanging on with one hand and swiping blindly round him with the wand in the other, came once or twice very near to falling off.

But not quite. And, as mile after swift mile went by, Mary and Peter could see that the deer were beginning to tire. And above Doctor Dee, still fresh, and too clever to come down into the swirl of birds and defending antlers, sailed Madam Mumblechook.

They were on a slope now, a long slope running downhill. Here and there were tufts of rushes; they brushed the bellies of the running deer and swished past the children's feet. Beside them now, on the right, was the bright rush and noise of water. A river. A swift river, rushing down through stony rapids and over steep, white falls. Then suddenly, about a quar-

ter of a mile away, at the foot of the long slope, they saw what seemed to be a wide stretch of water.

The sea? thought Mary, and for the first time felt despair. If they had to cross a sea, without the deer, with perhaps only the frail help of the birds, and if the little broomstick tired. . . .

"It's the mist!" cried Peter. "I told you I got lost in it on the way here. If we get through that, we'll know the way home!"

It was indeed the mist, a great, white lake of mist, thick and rolling like cloud. The starlight was bright on the surface of it. The river rushed and cascaded right into it and was lost, as if there really was a sea or a lake below. But at least, once in the shelter of that thick cloud, they would need no escort, no cover. They could run at the broomstick's own pace, safe and shrouded, till perhaps on the other side they would see the familiar yellow lights of home.

The cloud of birds was already wheeling, ghostly, in and out of the edges of the mist. The herd went down the last slope with a slither and scatter of

turf, then slowed, trotted, stopped on the long stony strand where the river met the mist.

The big stag turned, the vapor swirling round his shoulders like cloud. The herd parted to let the children through into the safe shelter of the mist.

Then with a yell and a last, desperate swoop, Doctor Dee dived on them like a stone falling.

He almost reached them. But the great stag leaped clear into the air, straight over their heads, and his antlers struck the wizard's wand clean out of his hand. The wand flew wide. It struck the surface of the river. There was a hiss like steam as the green fire ran to and fro across the water, then a flash, a crack, a spurt of white smoke, and the wand vanished into the swirling river.

Behind the children was another crack, a flurry, then a crash. Past Mary's cheek went the broken half of a broom handle and a scatter of birch twigs. Then everything dimmed and vanished; stag, deer, birds, starlight all blotted out as their own little broomstick, undamaged, plunged forward with them into the cloud of mist.

14

HOME AGAIN, HOME AGAIN

The mist was not very thick after all. Once, momentarily, they ran through a thinning patch that showed a glimpse of sky, and Peter spoke breathlessly in Mary's ear.

"She's still there. High up. I don't think she saw us."

"She can't attack us here. I think it's water underneath," said Mary. "As long as we stay low enough, we're safe."

"And when we come out of it we'll be on our own side, I'm sure of that. But how do we know she can't follow us there? After all, we've been on *her* side of the mist."

Mary was silent for a moment. This was something she had not thought of. "But she can't take the cats back, and would she follow us just to get revenge?"

"I expect she wants her Master Spell book back," said Peter.

"Oh! Of course she does. Then we'll have to use it to protect ourselves, won't we?"

"Sure thing," said Peter. He sounded light-

hearted. "As soon as we're near home, you can chant your spell. It'll bring her broomstick down sharpish, and once we're in our own fields, it won't matter if it unmagicks ours as well."

"But our dear little broomstick—"

"W*ants* to be unmagicked," said Peter. "Can't you feel it?"

And indeed, the broomstick had given a little skip and a bound or two, and quickened its already headlong pace through the mist.

"Don't you see?" asked Peter. "It's probably enchanted, too, and it's tired of having to rush about at all hours, and wait where it's told, and carry tiresome old witches around all the time."

"Thank you very much," said Mary.

"Well, I didn't mean you. Anyway, I'm sure it's as much prison for the broomsticks as it was for the birds and deer."

Mary, feeling the little broomstick wriggle and jump beneath them, thought Peter was probably right. In any case, they had to get rid of Madam Mumblechook somehow, and the only way to do so

was by using the Master Spell. But they would have to time it correctly, or it could mean disaster for them all. . . .

She was opening her mouth to say so, when Peter's hand touched her arm, and she realized that the mist was thinning. There was darkness ahead that looked solid, and from time to time a glimpse of darkness below that did not seem so solid, but that caught and reflected stray gleams like water rippling.

And daylight was coming. Around them the faint light touched the mist, hazing it with color. In a short time, the Master Spell would be powerless.

All at once they ran out from the covering mist, over a narrow strand where pebbles gleamed and the faint waves crisped and whispered. Then up over a meadowland starred with daisies showing pale already in the growing light.

As they ran clear of the mist they heard Madam Mumblechook's voice behind them, high above.

"Stop!" cried Mary, and the little broomstick stopped and sat down. The children, slipping from its back, looked up the way they had come.

She was there, some way back, high over the lake of mist. She must have been cruising to and fro above them, waiting, as she and Doctor Dee had waited above the wood, to see where they would break cover. Behind her the sky was growing pale, the stars fading already into a strip of swimming and luminous rose. But the magic round her still shone green and baleful, and the sparks spurted from under her broomstick as she hauled it round sharply in midair and set it on a course straight for the little group on the ground.

"I have you!" she shrilled. "I have you now! My book! My book!"

And she put her broomstick into a dive.

The cats were hissing; even Peter was looking scared. Mary whipped the book out of her pocket and groped for the flashlight. But she did not need it. The book fell open in her hands at the Master Spell, and there on the page the words glowed clear and red. Standing straight and without moving a step, while the light grew and the dawn came and the witch tore down towards them like a baleful star,

Mary began, loudly and very clearly, to recite the Master Spell.

The witch heard it. They saw her urge her broomstick faster, faster, to force it down to earth before the spell came to an end. They saw her glance over her shoulder at the growing light, which would take from Mary the power the spell gave her. But it was no use. Madam Mumblechook was still well up above the mist, and the last of the stars were still visible, when, triumphantly, Mary finished.

At once the flying broomstick lost way and plunged, as suddenly as a falling stone, into the mist. There was a yell, an enormous splash, then silence except for a hiss like metal cooling, and a sudden agitated lapping of water on the pebbled shore. Beside the children, the little broomstick gave a leap, a buck, a funny little flick of its birch twigs, and vanished. And with a splash of gold and red and lovely light, the sun came up.

The two children, with the two cats, looked about them as the golden light grew.

They were standing in a long meadow where cows grazed, apparently unalarmed by what had happened. In front of them was a narrow strip of shingle which edged, not a lake of mist, but a river. The mist had gone. And the river was vaguely familiar to Mary.

"There," said Peter suddenly, "by the bridge. That's my bicycle. I thought I knew the place. It's only three miles home from here. Can you hang on behind?"

She hadn't even been missed. The front door at Red Manor was still unlocked, and, after the children had said good-bye, Mary let herself and Tib in quietly, locked the door behind her, and crept up to her bedroom. The grandfather clock, coming up to five o'clock, merely winked its brass at her and ticked calmly on.

Her room was as she had left it, with one difference. The fly-by-night had vanished from the glass. And when she took off her coat and put a hand in the pocket, she found only a flashlight. The book of Master Spells had vanished, too.

And padding round in circles on the quilt, purring, looking very contented and very sleepy indeed, was a very ordinary cat, who would never, Mary knew, try to be a witch's cat again.

"I have had a letter from your parents," said Great-aunt Charlotte next morning.

She had come down, early for her, while Mary was still finishing breakfast. For a moment Mary felt alarmed, thinking that her great-aunt must know something about the night's adventures, but Great-aunt Charlotte was as placid as usual, and obviously pleased with the news she bore.

"They are coming back at the beginning of October," said Great-aunt Charlotte, "and I am delighted to say that they talk of buying a house in this part of the country. There is a delightful house about three miles from here, beside the river."

"Is it near a bridge?" asked Mary.

"Bridge? Of course they play bridge. Why do you ask?"

"I—it doesn't matter. It will be lovely!"

Great-aunt Charlotte patted her shoulder kindly. "And I have more good news for you. The vicar came home yesterday. His son Peter is a boy about your own age. It will be pleasant for both of you to have a companion, I am sure."

"That'll be lovely, too." Mary had kept her eyes on her plate while her great-aunt spoke. Now she looked up. "Aunt Charlotte, if we come to live here, could I keep Tib, please?"

"Tib? Oh, the cat. I see no reason why not, if your parents make no objection. Confucius certainly does not care for him. In fact, I am not at all sure if he even belongs to the house. Do you know, Miss Marshbanks?"

"He does not belong here," said Miss Marjoribanks with decision. "And he certainly seems to have strangely taken to Mary."

Mary looked down at her plate again. Miss Marjoribanks had—it seemed to her—been watching her very narrowly indeed this morning. Was it possible that she had heard something? Or even seen?

Great-aunt Charlotte dropped an absent kiss on Mary's cheek and went out, with Confucius waddling behind her. Miss Marjoribanks rose and went briskly to her chair to get her knitting. It was, thought Mary, going to be the usual busy day, except that now she was going to see Peter, and Tib was going with her.

At that exact moment—perhaps a little of the magic still clung about him—Tib jumped onto the windowsill outside. Mary went across to open the window. It was a brilliantly sunny day, and Zebedee was on the lawn sweeping up the leaves with his big broomstick, a normal, ordinary broomstick, which did exactly as he told it.

The click of knitting needles suddenly stopped. Looking up, Mary caught Miss Marjoribanks watching the broomstick, too, still with that strange look in her eyes.

Suddenly, memories came back to her; the rushing and crackling of twigs on that first night when Tib leaped to her windowsill—the crash of a heavy body hurtling down too fast on an unmanage-

able broomstick. Then there was Miss Marjoribanks' stiffness at breakfast next morning, and the way she and Tib had looked at one another. Finally there was the memory of someone, somewhere—this memory was vague and misty, and getting all the time vaguer—of someone writing in an enormous book, for the second time: "Mary Smith, Red Manor, Shropshire. . . ."

Mary saw it now. Poor Miss Marjoribanks had been Tib's first choice, but she hadn't liked Tib, so she had never found the fly-by-night, never had the power to manage the little broomstick, open the locks. . . .

Beside her Tib purred, arching himself against her. She stooped to whisper in his ear, "You tried both of us, didn't you, to get your friend Gib back from . . . from wherever it was? Poor Miss Marshbanks! She'll never know what she missed!"

She paused. Later, when she had caught up on her sleep, no doubt she would remember it all perfectly.

Miss Marjoribanks, who would never know

what she had missed, was unwrapping a new hank of wool in a rather nasty green shade.

"It is delightful, my dear, that your parents should be thinking of moving near us. Of course it will mean that you will have to board at school, but no doubt you will enjoy that? Of course you will, and indeed needs must, since"—she paused and fixed Mary with her eye—"since there is no school near here of any kind." She paused again. "Of any kind," she repeated firmly.

"Not now, anyway," said Mary softly to Tib, who was sitting beside her.

Tib smirked.

Nobody ever quite knew how the birch grove came to be there, down beside the river, just near the old stone bridge. They grew like magic, those birches—or so said Mary's father, who had bought the field along with the nearby house. And very soon there they were, full-grown, golden in spring and green in summer, and in autumn rich with orange and russet and amber and all the colors of sunset.

But in winter, when the trees were bare, the color of dark raisins, bloomy with purple against the high windy sky, you could hear the wind swishing through them, whistling like something flying; and the myriad tiny twigs rattled like the hoofs of galloping deer, and overhead the birds tumbled, crying and shrilling, in the winter sky.

But Mary, who was away at school, and seldom went down to the woods in winter, never heard it.

And if she had, she would not have remembered.

THE LITTLE BROOMSTICK

Mary Stewart

"Take a crooked sixpence,
Crawl a crooked mile,
Lay it in the moonlight
On a crooked stile;
Get a crooked cat
To catch a crooked mouse,
And lock 'em up forever
In a little crooked house.

It must, Mary realized, be a spell or a charm, but what kind of magic could this be for? Nothing, surely, to do with the flying broomstick and Tib, the cat, and the beautiful fly-by-night flower?"

"Mary steals the sorceress' book of spells and releases a horde of bewitched animals in a scene that suggests the Day of Judgment."—*Horn Book*

"A light, entertaining fantasy."—*ALA Booklist*

Mary Stewart has been interested in writing since her childhood. Among her best-selling novels are *The Crystal Cave*, *Nine Coaches Waiting*, and *Madam, Will You Talk?* In 1968 she was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts. She lives in Edinburgh with her husband.

A Yearling Book

Dell Publishing Co., Inc. New York

008-012

PRINTED IN U.S.A.